The Shinzahou Chronicles Vol 5: Suzaku No Unmei

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Fushigi Yuugi

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The Shinzahou Chronicles Vol 5: Suzaku No Unmei

VraieEsprit

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Summary

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Description

Hikari's true purpose in the Shijintenchisho has finally become clear, but is she strong enough to fulfil it? Hyoushin & Maichu head south in search of aid but a shadow stalks them with murder on his mind. Meanwhile the evil in the East continues to grow, and time is running out. Can Toroki's prediction of a world of death really be prevented or are they all doomed?

Chapter 1

The Shinzahou Chronicles
Introduction and Disclaimer

"Anata wa kitto watashi no yuuki, anata wa kitto watashi no hikari."

(Surely you're my courage, surely you're my light.)

Chijou no Seiza — Eikouden opening theme.

The final part!

Everything is about to be resolved — one way or another.

But of course, before it can be, there's got to be your average helping of betrayal, death, blood and vengeance piled into the equation!

I do owe readers one small apology. I did say at the outset that this was a new and miko free legend. But I lied. It's not. :P :) I *did* say Hiki wasn't Suzaku no Miko, though, and that wasn't a lie. She was never going to be that. My apologies for the slight deception. In truth, it wasn't a deliberate act. When I wrote the prologue to *Densetsu no Hikari,* I hadn't thought this far ahead. It was only as I got into the second story I realised how it was going to go. By which point it was too late to edit the original intro lol.

In the end of the last story, Hikari's true purpose has been revealed. But of course, it's more complicated than it seems at first sight. She is, after all, still Suzaku no Shinzahou. :)

I'd like to think Hikari's grown up some since the start of the story. How to end this part has been on my mind a little, too — hopefully the conclusion is satisfactory :) And of course, Hikari isn't the only important character. A lot of people will show their true colours in this story. One or two major characters might (*will…*) even die for the things they believe. Such are the casualties of war. Before I began, I estimated four or five named character deaths overall. I'm now fairly confident that there will be five. This includes any deaths in prior stories — so Jin and Bachisu are both already accounted for. That leaves three… for this story. *(Unless I randomly decide to kill someone else on a whim, that is!)*

I'm not saying who they are… but it will become clear. I will only say this — that one character who I was going to kill in the end I

couldn't do, because I was too soft on them. LOL :) (You can try and guess who that is, if you like…)

Part five is called *Suzaku no Unmei* — Suzaku's Destiny, or the Fate of Suzaku. Obviously, of course, it's talking about Hikari this time around. But as I already said — it's not just about Suzaku any more. Consequently, the title also refers to Kounan, I suppose, and the destiny of the people there, too.

Slight explanation on **Hyoushin's manner of speech** in the prologue — in case anyone hasn't realised yet, Hyoushin did not learn to speak fluent Kutou dialect until he came under the Emperor's wing. He simply picked up bits and pieces during his seven years of slavery. Aoiketsu was born only a few months after his first meeting with Kintsusei, so Hyoushin's language skills are still somewhat flawed at this point. Even in the actual story timeline, 18 years on, Hyoushin still naturally speaks with a Meihi accent. He has to make a conscious effort to eradicate it from his speech, but sometimes it still comes through. It's a sign that he's speaking a little more according to his true feelings, when he lets his concentration slip and speaks in his natural manner. But at the point of the prologue, his Kutou dialect is still in the process of being learnt. Obviously, the reason he speaks so formally as a rule is twofold — partly to keep himself distant but also because he's learnt his dialect largely from being at court and in the company of politely spoken people. This explains why he has the vocabulary he does. I've tried to keep to the same manner of error as he used when Kintsusei first saved him — when he made the decision to only ever speak Kintsusei's language from hereon in. But if you find his speech somewhat bizarre, this is not me having a complete grammatical brain meltdown. It is deliberate. I hope it's also comprehensible. I think so, anyhow.

And yay — at long last — I get to write a little about Kaiga Ruiren-sama! (a little glimpse into Aoi's mother's heart… hehe). Her name means "Tears of love" essentially. I guess this gives a glimpse as to why…;)

Not much more to say except thank you for coming on this journey with me!

Watase Yuu is the owner of FY and the characters, not me!! Any added characters (ie Hyoushin, Aoiketsu, Shishi, Miramu, etc) are of my own creation, except for when they tie in with Watase Yuu's world — they are based on concepts and frameworks entirely unrelated to any other source. (This includes all reference/character biography/ fleshing, background and detail given to the Byakko Seishi "Toroki"

and “Amefuri” although the concept of Byakko Seishi belongs to Watase Yuu.)

My interpretation of Toroki and Amefuri are unique to me and are not to be duplicated in any other source without permission. The Meihi tribe, their language and appearance are entirely of my creation also, and ditto goes for them in terms of fan-fiction re-production.

(And the same goes for any other OCs I happen to have thrown into the mix!)

第五巻：朱雀の運命
Volume Five: Suzaku no Unmei

Prologue

The Imperial Palace of Kutou
Eighteen Years Earlier

So this was what it meant to have his freedom.

Hyoushin rested his hands against the sill of the chamber, gazing out at the palace surrounds as he took in the bustling servants and harried envoys, all bent on their own particular errands. In the months since he had been in Kintsusei’s company, his entire world had been turned upside-down, and he had found himself transformed from slave to Emperor’s companion almost overnight.

When the Priest had first come to the barracks, and knelt before his young friend, Hyoushin had expected their connection to be severed completely. But the fifteen year old boy had had other ideas, and had said, firmly and plainly that if he was to be Emperor, it was only on the agreement that Hyoushin would come with him, and act as his protector.

For Hyoushin, the whole situation was somewhat imcomprehensible. Kintsusei, the soldier who had saved his life now wore the ring and title of Emperor of Kutou, the only surviving son of the butchering, sadistic Shoukitei. Under him seethed an Empire racked with deceit and uncertainty, a world in which many were still beaten as slaves. And yet, despite his elevation to power, Kintsusei had not forgotten about his companion. Even when the Priest had pointed out the potential reaction to an Emperor who chose a Meihi over a trained soldier for his bodyguard, the boy had been firm.

“It will be Hyoushin, or I will not consent at all.” He had said quietly. “He is my choice, Kikei. I have helped to teach him. I will continue to teach him. He will be loyal to me where others may well not be. I know what betrayal means — I’ve seen it from every angle throughout my life so far. But Hyoushin is not like the greedy, corrupt members of Kutou’s noble

council. He is a man who will not betray me, no matter how high the offer. So I will have him and no other… if he consents to the favour I ask of him."

Since that day, Hyoushin had had his own quarters both within the palace and the military barracks. And even though he knew that many of the men around him both disliked and mistrusted his ghostly, ethereal appearance, somehow inside his battered heart he knew that Kintsusei did not.

"I have placed my faith in this man." He thought to himself, as his gaze rested on the heart of the Imperial quarters. "I do not understand why he has decided this way, nor do I know whether he still seeks only to repay a debt to my people for the deaths of so many. But whatever his reasons, thanks to him, I am free. I am no longer a slave to Kaiga Gin… and as such, I will do whatever my Emperor asks of me. Even if all the people here despise me, I shall not care at all so long as I am doing Kintsusei-sama's bidding. He has shown me kindness and mercy. I will repay him with my loyalty until death."

"Kokizu?"

At that moment, a voice pierced his musings and he started at the faint sound, turning back towards the doorway as he registered the presence of the widowed lady that stood watching him. She was wrapped in heavy robes, her swollen stomach almost concealed by the fine fabric, but Hyoushin saw beyond the finery to the frailty of the woman who now stood before him. He frowned, eying her impassively as he sought to suppress flickers of unpleasant memory, and Ruiren managed a faint smile.

"I'm sorry." She reproached herself. "It's 'Hyoushin' now, isn't it? Such the Emperor has named you — much better a name than the one I've used."

"Not trouble me either way, my Lady." Hyoushin said softly. "You may call me which you will. In the end, it serves same purpose."

"Indeed." Ruiren sat down in an empty seat, gesturing for him to join her. "Are you busy? Or may I speak with you?"

"I have no duty this moment."

"Good." Ruiren smiled, meeting his amethyst gaze as he came to stand before her. "Because there are things I want to say to you alone, and there is little time in which to do it. My son will soon be here… and I don't yet know whether my strength will hold out enough to bring him safely into this world. I pray to Seiryuu that he will give me that strength — but I don't deserve to have a God answer my prayers. A wife who betrayed her

husband… a woman who stood by and let hundreds of innocents be hurt because of her fear. I want to apologise to you, Kokizu. You are the only one left to whom I can."

Hyoushin frowned.

"Owe no apology, Ruiren-sama." He said softly. "I not think was ever beaten on your orders, nor ever asked anything beyond ability. Is true you received same evil from Lord Gin at times… you are not who needs to give apology."

"Even if you're right, I still want to give it." Ruiren said quietly. "To be stripped of your family, your identity and your culture… to lose even your name, and the language you grew up speaking… it has always hurt me, knowing that I was somehow complicit to this and yet there was nothing I could do."

"Nothing indeed." Hyoushin said frankly. "Had you help any escape, Lord Gin would hunt, torture, kill them all. And you yourself also. As I said, Ruiren-sama… you acted in only way you could. Making agreement with Lord Nakago was only thing you could. And because of it, my life is saved. I should thank you for mercy, not listen to you regret."

"You have always spoken so evenly, and without hate or malice." Ruiren sighed. "I tried to treat those of you who served me as people — that's why, in absence of your own names, I gave you ones of my own. I did not like it — I do not like it. When Gin gave the order for the slaves to be slain, I tried to prevent it. But I… I am weak and he pushed me aside. In the end, I wanted to save them. But I… I condemned them. You alone survived… you alone can hear those regrets."

"Then I accept on behalf of all." Hyoushin said softly. "For them, maybe, death is their freedom. And now Lord Kintsusei is Emperor, things in Kutou change. I have faith in that. Is… not like his father."

"No, indeed." Ruiren smiled ruefully. "The son is possessed of a kind heart and a just mind. Even as such a young boy — he will one day be a fine King. And he has been generous towards me, even though I cannot prove my story. Not yet."

She brushed her fingers against her stomach, then,

"Maybe soon." She whispered.

"In which case, you are better to resting, Ruiren-sama."

"I know." Ruiren admitted. "But the truth is, Hyoushin, I don't believe I have enough in me to deliver the boy safely and recover my own health. I'm not strong — not now. And I… I'm not afraid of that. With all I've

allowed to happen, I don't deserve to have the chance of a life myself now. But I want to bring the boy into the world. I am sure… it is a boy. I just… I believe that he is. That he will be Nakago's son — and somehow he can continue what his father began. To free Kutou, to help bring peace… this is my hope. Even if I can't see him do it — I must trust that he will."

"Indeed."

"This is the other reason I want to speak to you." Ruiren raised dark eyes to the Meihi's amethyst ones. "And not as an order, Kokizu. I ask this as a favour to a dying woman, for the sake of the Shougun under whom you fought, and through whom you gained your freedom."

"What is favour, Ruiren-sama?" Hyoushin frowned. "I am not following."

Ruiren patted her stomach again.

"When he needs me, I won't be here." She said softly. "The Emperor has assured me that the child will be well supported — there will be nurses and maids on hand to take over my duties, should I succumb. But that is… not enough. I need… I want him to grow up with the spirit to protect Kutou. And… to be strong and proud of that spirit. I want my son to make a difference where I could not — where I was weak, I want him to be strong. This is why I am putting all my strength into bringing him into this world. He is my last hope."

"I see." Hyoushin pursed his lips.

"As the Emperor's ally, you are as close to this matter as anyone, now." Ruiren continued. "And I believe you care about saving Kutou, too. I have heard you speak so — that you wish to ensure all slaves are freed and all of Kutou live together in peace. Well, my son will be the embodiment of that — his father was at least half Hin, and I am of noble Kutou stock. As a man of tribal birth yourself, I'm asking you to help my son. To guide him — teach him. Make him learn the things he can't learn from his father — but also, the things he needs to know to be himself. Will you do that for me, Hyoushin? Will you ensure my son is educated as he should be, and trained, and brought up to put Kutou top of his priorities?"

"If he is Shougun's son, Ruiren-sama, I think he would not have other priority." Hyoushin said evenly, and Ruiren nodded.

"But he will need guidance." She said softly, reaching out a fragile hand to grasp his pale one. "I know the Meihi are peaceful people. And I know you have suffered — I know better than most what you have suffered, although I will never speak of it, to you or to others. With you I feel a connection — I married Gin the same month you were brought to the

estate, and we both began our suffering together… you a boy of ten, I a naive idiot of sixteen. Yet here we both are, seven years on — both still alive after all the bloodshed. That must be a sign that there is something we can yet do. This child… I'm sure I'm alive only to deliver him, for Seiryuu's sake — for Kutou's sake. And you — you for the same end — to help fix the mess that Nakago could not fix in the end."

Her expression became sad, and Hyoushin knew that, despite the fact it was almost three months since the Shougun's death, and even longer since he had been in her company, his companion still held the Seishi's memory fondly in her heart.

"We both understand what world this boy is being born into." She continued with a sigh. "Please, Hyoushin — will you promise me to guide my son as best you can towards Kutou's salvation? I have such faith that he will be strong, just as the man who sired him was. And I cannot give him anything as a mother, except the heritage of the Kaiga family. You, on the other hand…"

She paused, offering him a smile.

"You have strength and courage beyond anyone I have ever known." She whispered. "To suffer so much and yet still speak to me so fairly… even for your young years, Hyoushin, you are the one in whom I wish to entrust my son's future. You are becoming a fine soldier even now, and you have blossomed in strength since you entered the Emperor's company. I have no doubt that as time goes on, you will become stronger. My son will need that — and Kintsusei-sama, despite his kindness and his battle wisdom is still a boy. You are now a man. Will you undertake my task? Will you grant this last request of a dying woman?"

Hyoushin was silent for a moment. Then, slowly, he inclined his head.

"I will do what I can for sake of Kutou." He said quietly. "But also for Ruiren-sama's sake. I told you — I have no ill will towards you for past. And I not focus on it. I will look to future — and if I can help guide boy, I will. It is in my interests to do, after all. He is son of Shougun… one of Kutou's protectors."

"Yes." Ruiren nodded, relief flooding her gaze. She held out her hand, glancing at the ring that glittered on her middle finger, then she slipped it off, holding it out.

"I may not speak to you again like this, so I wish you to know this now." She said quietly. "This… was Gin's. It signifies the overlordship of the Kaiga family… I took it from his body, after Nakago slew him. I wish my son to have it… even though he is not a Kaiga by birth. I hope that it will give him strength to be a leader and a captain in his own right — to

heal the battered image of the family into which I married."

She looked rueful.

"And also, because I have nothing else to give him, except life." She added. "Will you keep it for him, and when he is old enough, let him understand that it was from me? Perhaps through it I will be able to watch over him somehow — and I do want him to know that I didn't leave him because I did not love him. He will lose his family just as you lost yours, Hyoushin — so I think you of everyone can understand why I want him to know I loved him… even before he was born."

"I understand." Hyoushin took the ring, glancing at it, then slipping it into the folds of his clothing. "I will ensure child receives it when is old enough to comprehend its significance."

"Thank you." Ruiren smiled. "The Emperor is lucky to have you on his side, I'm sure of that. Kokizu or Hyoushin — it doesn't matter if you're called Little Scar or Heart of Ice… either way, neither one truly represents the kindness that must live deep within you. I know my son will want for nothing, with you as a mentor."

"I hope I live up to expectation, Ruiren-sama." Hyoushin said gravely. "But I will do my best."

"Then there is one last thing I must say, before I retire." Ruiren clasped her hands together in her lap. "I do not know what will happen when my son is born, or whether I will breathe after he takes his first gasps of air. I am determined he will live — and if that takes every drop of my strength, so be it. I will do what is necessary. But I wish… to give him his name."

She sighed.

"I know that you will not, in this climate, be able to publicise the truth of his heritage." She admitted. "Even to be the son of Kaiga Gin is less controversial and dangerous than acknowledging him as the son of the Shougun. But one day, he must know. And I wish… to name him so… so that one day he will understand the secrets in his past."

"What name would that be, my Lady?"

Ruiren smiled.

"Aoiketsu." She said quietly. Hyoushin frowned.

"And in Kutou's dialect, this means what, exactly?" He asked quietly.

"Ah yes… I forgot that even though your spoken language has considerably improved in the last few months, your written language must still be limited." Ruiren offered him an apologetic look. "It's easy to forget,

when even in this short space of time you seem to understand far more clearly our language — and also use it with far more fluency and confidence than you ever did before."

"It is Hyoushin's language. So my language, now." Hyoushin agreed. "I am trying best to learn it right. But I do not know… what this name means. I am sorry, Ruiren-sama. I am still Meihi — I do not understand."

"Don't ever apologise — to me or to anyone — for being Meihi." Ruiren said softly. "That's nothing for you to be ashamed of. Kutou's indigenous folk were the ones who sinned against you, not the other way around. You should have pride in your heritage — even though Gin tried to have it beaten out of you. Promise me that, Hyoushin — that you won't lose your pride in who you really are, even if you can't ever go back."

Hyoushin stared at her, momentarily startled, and the young woman smiled, the gesture lighting up the natural beauty in her tired features.

"Promise me?" She repeated, and slowly, the Meihi nodded.

"I will try." He said quietly. "But now, I must be… in Kutou's language. I am still learning, thanks to Emperor's kind tuition. I will master it, but writing is difficult. For time being, Ruiren-sama, would you explain to me why you choose to name your son so? Aoi is blue, correct?"

"Yes." Ruiren nodded. 'The name… it means "Blue Blood', Hyoushin. And so the boy's will be. The blood of Seiryuu — of a Celestial Warrior."

"I comprehend." Hyoushin nodded his head. "And I will ensure he is so named, Ruiren-sama. You have my word."

Chapter 2

Chapter One

"We're almost there."

As the lights of Eiyou glittered before them, Shishi let out a heavy sigh, relief in her bronze eyes. "At last. It feels like we've been riding forever — is it me or did the journey back take longer than the one there?"

"It almost seemed a wasted journey entirely." Aoiketsu bit his lip, gazing down at the bustling capital city. Even though it was drawing towards evening, the streets were still full of people, some looking for evening entertainment while others tried to make a last minute sale in Eiyou's most busy summer season. "We went to Hokkan but we didn't come back with the Shinzahou, after all."

"You said yourself that you didn't mind your Commander whipping it away." Shishi pointed out to him. "Why the hesitation now, Aoi? You had a change of heart now you're back in the midst of the South?"

"No…" Aoiketsu sighed, shaking his head. "I just think that maybe Reizeitei-sama would look on me more kindly if I had something pretty to give him. That's all."

"Reizeitei-sama?" Hikari twisted in the saddle to stare at him, almost losing her grip on the horse's reins as she did so. "What do you mean? Why would Reizeitei-sama be angry with you?"

"Woah, watch it. You almost slipped right off then." Aoiketsu warned her. "I'm glad you're getting more confident riding, Hikari, but even so, you don't have to take silly risks."

"That isn't answering my question." Hikari frowned. "What do you mean, Aoi-kun? Why the troubled face?"

"Probably it's the little matter of him being sent here as Kutou's spy." Myoume said lightly, shooting Aoiketsu an amused glance, and Aoiketsu grimaced.

"Kutou's spy. Nakago's son. Take your pick." He said darkly. "I doubt the Emperor of Kounan will look kindly on either one of those things. I'll be lucky he doesn't throw me in irons the moment we reach the palace — which seems to be where we're heading, if we're taking

this path all the way to the heart of Eiyou. Myoume, I thought I was the navigator — why are we here, exactly?"

"As you surmise, to make report to the Emperor." Myoume said innocently. "Also because there's no way for us to get back to the Eastern Village on horseback tonight. It's far too dark and even though half of the bandits in the south-west wouldn't be interested in attacking us, the other half would be more than keen to lay hands on Tasuki's cub."

"They might get a shock, then, if they tried." Shishi said frankly, holding up her right wrist as she did so. "The cub isn't flying solo at the moment."

"Do you think that the Emperor will be mad with Aoi?" Hikari looked anxious. "Even if we speak to him — Myoume, do you think…?"

"I think that he's probably had plenty of time to get used to the idea of Aoi as Kounan's ally." Myoume said reflectively. "Chichiri was going to speak to him after we left, and put it to him as Emperor that he wasn't our enemy and shouldn't be treated as such. Even if Boushin-sama has personal feelings about it, that young man has fully embraced his duty as ruler of the South. He won't imprison Aoi. He mightn't like it — but it'll be all right. For Kounan's sake, he'll grin and bear it."

"I suppose that's something." Aoiketsu sighed. "I just wish I knew exactly what I was doing. I just get more and more confused. I'm protecting Hikari. I want to protect her — hell, I… I *love* her, and that's something that's gone too far for me to turn my back on now. I can't help it — it's just there inside of me and it's okay with me that it is. But what that means for Kutou — how it ties me into the South when I want to help the East… as Nakago's son, how can Seiryuu want me as Suzaku's protector? That can't make sense, surely?"

"A lot of things still don't make sense." Shishi rubbed her wrist ruefully. "Doryoku is still trying to get into my good books after what happened in that shrine."

"She's still feeling bad about it, huh?" Hikari asked, and Shishi nodded.

"Just a bit." She said ruefully. "Of course, it'd be better for both her and me if she stopped and just let me listen to my own thoughts for a while. I'm getting used to the idea of her hanging all over my mental state, but even so, sometimes I'd rather have some time to myself."

“Well, you did say you didn’t want to be alone on the mountain, right?” Hikari pointed out. “So long as you have Doryoku, you can’t be that.”

“I think we went North for a reason, and we achieved that reason.” Myoume looked thoughtful. “I don’t know how to explain it, not exactly. But I didn’t have any visions of that temple or Bakaru-san or any of that. I didn’t see Hyoushin crossing our path at that point, even though he commented on it when we did. It was like… something else. The snow, the cave, the music — all of that I saw and saw really clearly. But the Shinzahou? I never saw that at all. Not once.”

“So you think Doryoku was what we went North to get after all?” Aoiketsu shot her a funny look. “In which case we needn’t have crossed into Hokkan and I wouldn’t be wondering what exactly my Commander is thinking of me right at the moment. I might be in the shit with *two* Emperors at the moment, you know… at least tell me there was a purpose to us going to Hokkan.”

“There was.” Hikari sighed. “To get the Shinzahou and we failed. Even if you didn’t see it, Myoume. Aren’t I supposed to be trying to change fate? But Bakaru-san wouldn’t listen to me. Or at least, I think… maybe he was listening, but what he said was strange. He said that giving the Shinzahou to Hyoushin was beneficial to me as well as to him. I don’t understand what that means… why would it benefit me, if Kutou had the Shinzahou?”

“Beats me.” Shishi shrugged. “But Do-nee says that Bakaru’s the only one who can decide the fate of the Shinzahou — who to give it to and all.”

“Well, then ask her what she knows about it.” Aoiketsu suggested. “If she’s so sure that Bakaru-san’s decision was okay, at least let her explain why.”

“She just says it’s because he’s the Shinzahou’s Guardian.” Shishi responded helplessly. “And that’s that.”

“Well, at least it was the Commander.” Aoiketsu reflected. “Bakaru-san said what I’ve been saying all along — that he’s not a bad person and that he’s pursuing peace. I’ve told you that time and time again — Myoume, will you believe me now?”

“I don’t know what to think about that man.” Myoume’s expression became troubled. “Or his continued appearance in my thoughts and visions. When we saw him in that shrine, Aoi, he looked like… something I’d seen before. Somewhere. But I… can’t place what or where it came from. Maybe it didn’t — perhaps it was just a delusion.

Since Bachisu shattered my senses I've been having more trouble cluing things together than usual, to be honest. That's why I was so relieved when we got into the mountains and it was as I'd envisioned it. I'm not sure I'm operating on full throttle even now… so I don't know what to make of it at all."

"What about Miramu?" Hikari sent her an alarmed look. "You could still sense him if he came — right?"

"Yes, I'm pretty sure." Myoume agreed. "When Bachisu-san used his magic, I was sent completely reeling. But it's not like that now, and my brother's chi is the chi I know best of all. Don't worry, Hikari. I'll know if he comes into our line of sight."

"Then that's all right at least." Hikari sighed, and Aoiketsu frowned, shaking his head.

"Not really." He murmured. "Myoume, are you serious? You've been guiding us — saying things — all based on what might be crazy nonsense? What if I'm not what you think I am after all? What if…"

"Shut up." Shishi said bluntly, sending him a dark look. "You make your own decisions, don't you? Or do you need Myoume to tell you what to do after all? Shit, Aoi, be a man about it, okay? Are you protecting Hiki because Myoume told you you were sent here to do so — or because you care about her?"

Aoiketsu reddened.

"Because I care about her." He said softly. "I guess you're right. It just doesn't help me figure out my own role in all this. That's all."

"I don't think what I've seen is unreliable." Myoume said slowly. "I just think… the pictures… haven't been so clear as they might have been since our encounter with the circus. The truth is I'm not used to siphoning out thoughts and images in this kind of environment. I'm active, on the move, with company… I'm creating thoughts and memories of my own to intersperse with the ones I'm receiving from Byakko or through other people. It's not easy to differentiate one thing from the other, sometimes."

"Is there anything we can do about that?" Hikari cast her a quizzical glance, and Myoume shook her head.

"No." She replied. "It's up to me to re-order myself, that's all. I've been constantly on alert, but when we get back home, I'm going to take a while to try and get my head straight. I'll still be listening out for Miramu, and I won't isolate myself from the team — but I am going to hide myself away for a while on and off during the daytime

to just focus all my remaining strength on pulling the loose threads back in place. It's too important for me to find them before it's too late, so it's the only option available."

"Being around us really makes it hard, huh?" Shishi said pensively, and Myoume smiled.

"No." She admitted. "Being around you makes me feel like Myoume again. And that's a good thing — that makes me happy. But *Toroki* is the one Byakko needs and I can't ignore it, when he gave me this power for this purpose. So sometimes I need to be Toroki, not Myoume. And hopefully then I'll be able to put things in their rightful place."

"Well, we're almost back now." Aoiketsu gestured to the glittering gates of the Imperial palace, biting his lip as he cast a glance at his companions. "Are we seeking the Emperor's company tonight? Or…?"

"Chichiri is here." Myoume said simply. "I would say it was a coincidence, but I don't really believe in those. I think it's more likely he sensed Hikari was in the vicinity and came here to meet us. With any luck, he's our ride back to the mountains tonight. The horses can be stabled here… with Tasuki's contacts, I'm sure that there'll be a way to get them home tomorrow, once they've had a well-earned rest."

"The poor things probably won't want to look at us again after this, even if they did have a brief rest in Yukigase." Shishi agreed, reaching down absently to pat the neck of her steed. "And that's good news, if Chichiri's really here. Home sounds good, after the journey we've had."

"Who demands entrance to the Royal Palace of his Highness Reizeitei-sama?"

A guard blocked their way at that moment, and Myoume reined in her horse, casting the man a smile.

"Toroki of Byakko and her companions, Sukunami Hikari, Kou Karin, and Kaiga Aoiketsu." She said clearly, even as Shishi bristled at the use of her real name. "We seek an audience with the Emperor and if possible, with Chichiri-sama also — who I believe is currently within."

"Toroki-sama." The guard stepped back, saluting her with a smile. "Proceed. The Emperor has been expecting your arrival. As you surmise, Chichiri-sama is here and he and Lord Reizeitei have been anxiously anticipating your return."

“Then we won’t keep them waiting any longer.” Myoume decided, dismounting her horse and indicating for her companions to do the same even as men rushed forward to take the tired animals. “Thank you. If Reizeitei-sama is expecting us, we’ll head right there.”

“Are you really sure it’s a good idea for me to come with you?” Aoiketsu asked doubtfully, and the guard smiled again, inclining his head.

“Reizeitei-sama has expressed a particular interest in seeing you, Kaiga-dono.” He said cheerfully, and Aoiketsu felt his doubts growing. “Please, follow me. He is in the central chamber, and he will be glad of your company.”

“You heard the man.” Myoume nudged him. “Let’s go.”

The central chamber was not far from the courtyard entrance, and as they mounted the steps, the doors ahead swung back to admit them into the high-ceilinged room beyond. Within, two familiar figures were waiting, and any solemnity was broken in an instant as Hikari let out an exclamation, hurrying forward to hug the scarfaced sorcerer.

“Chichiri!” She exclaimed. “Did you really come here to meet us?”

“Well, it seemed like a good idea, you know.” Chichiri returned the hug, eying her with amusement. “You’re happy to see me, then? Good to know. Meikyo will be happy, too — she keeps asking me when Hikari-neechan is coming home.”

“Meikyo.” At this, Hikari’s expression clouded. “I’m sorry, Chichiri. We didn’t get the Shinzahou. I mean, we found it — we found the man who had it. But he… he wouldn’t give it to us. And there wasn’t much we could do. We couldn’t take it by force… even if we’d wanted to.”

“I see.” Chichiri pursed his lips. “But you all came back in safety. In itself, that is a victory.”

His good eye scanned the faces of the four travellers, then he smiled.

“Very much a victory.” He added softly. “I’m glad to see you all.”

“I also.” At that moment the chamber’s second occupant rose to his feet, regarding the quartet gravely as he did so. “Since the dangers are increasing. I trust that my Father’s sword has once again protected you from harm, Hikari-san?”

“Yes.” Hikari nodded. “It has, Heika. Thank you for trusting me with it — I’m doing my best to look after it.”

Reizeitei smiled, bowing his head slightly in acknowledgement.

“It is my pleasure.” He said softly, in his low, dignified voice. “I cannot go with you, but this way, at least, my father can.”

He paused at this moment, his gaze resting on Aoiketsu, and the young soldier saw a mixture of emotions flit through the Emperor’s eyes. He bit his lip, forcing himself to meet the other man’s gaze.

“Kaiga Aoiketsu.” Reizeitei still spoke in the same reasoned, even tones, but there was something else in the golden eyes now that put Aoiketsu on his guard. The Emperor held out his hand, gesturing to the door at the back of the chamber.

“I would like to speak to you alone, if you will so indulge me.” He said quietly, and Aoiketsu swallowed hard, sending Myoume a desperate glance. She shrugged, however, offering him a smile.

“We’re in no hurry.” She said levelly. “And you shouldn’t refuse an Emperor, Aoi-kun. Do as Reizeitei-sama suggests. We’ll wait for you — there’s a lot to tell Chichiri, too, after all. And we won’t go anywhere without you.”

“Then it is well.” Reizeitei nodded, his hand already around the golden handle that separated that room from this. “Come, Aoiketsu-san. We will speak more privately in here.”

Aoiketsu swallowed again, but gathered his wits, obediently crossing the finely polished floor towards the now-open door. Beyond stretched another chamber, just as finely laid out as the one in which they had all assembled, and something about the gentle grandeur of this palace put him even more on edge. In Kutou, he mused regretfully, the war had gone on for far too long for the palace to be half as much a work of art.

The soft click of the door behind them brought him back to the present, and he turned, freezing as he registered the glint of silver metal that now pointed at his throat. His eyes widened in alarm, registering the sudden change in his companion’s demeanour with a rising sense of panic and fear, for instead of the gentle, reasoned young Emperor, the man who now stood before him had the self-righteous glint of a wronged soldier in his golden gaze. Even from where he stood, Aoiketsu could tell that Reizeitei had the grip of a fighter and had been well trained in sword techniques. He cursed inwardly yet again that he did not carry a blade of his own, even as he wondered whether he would have dared to draw it on an Emperor even if he had been so armed.

For a moment there was silence between them. Then, very quietly, Reizeitei spoke.

“I wish to hear it from your own lips.” He said quietly, no warmth in his usually rich tones. “Who you truly are, Kaiga Aoiketsu. And do not ply me with falsehoods. I am not a fool. I will know if you seek to deceive me.”

“I…” Aoiketsu faltered, wetting his lips as he struggled to decide how best to answer. “I… I am Kaiga Aoiketsu, Heika. That… that is my name… as given me by my mother when I was born.”

“That is not what I mean.” Reizeitei’s eyes narrowed, and Aoiketsu almost thought he saw a flicker of Suzaku’s fire flare in those golden depths. “Your true purpose among us — disclose it now.”

Aoiketsu closed his eyes briefly, summoning all of his courage. Then he opened them, facing the Southern Emperor bravely.

“I’m here to protect Hikari.” He said quietly. “Even if I don’t totally understand it yet. That’s the truth, Heika. That’s why I’m here. I wasn’t sent here for that purpose… but it’s the purpose I have now and… and that was what your Highness asked me to disclose.”

Reizeitei did not answer immediately, and Aoiketsu took a hesitant step back, seeking to create distance between himself and the expensive, finely polished silver blade. This was not, he realised grimly, a bandit’s rough edged weapon, but a well cared for instrument of war, and the man who wielded it was more than capable of using it to its very best effect.

“If he wants to kill me, I’m not going to get out of here alive.” He muttered, trying to calm the panic that surged inside his heart. “Shit, and even after what Myoume said, too! Dammit, is he really going to… because I’m a… spy? Or…”

“You were sent here by Kintsusei of Kutou to spy on Suzaku’s people. Correct?” Reizeitei was speaking again, as the blade inched close enough to Aoiketsu’s jugular to brush teasingly against the skin of his throat. “To discover the secrets of our Shinzahou, no doubt… to convey back to your Eastern colleagues?”

“Y… yes sir.” Aoiketsu admitted hesitantly. “But…”

“And I trust you have discovered all you need to know?”

“I have discovered a lot of things.” Aoiketsu said truthfully. “But I haven’t reported to Kutou anything except what I’ve come to learn from Toroki’s predictions. That something evil is at work in my

homeland and that if we don't stop it, everyone will die. I have tried to protect my friends and my comrades by passing on that warning… but I have not told them Hikari's true nature. I will not, either. It is not my secret to tell."

"And I should believe in your word, why?" Reizeitei's eyes narrowed. "Your eyes are the eyes of that snake-tongued infidel who killed my father. I see the same glitter of seiran blue in them as the legends describe, when talking about the Shougun of Kutou's army. With such blood in your veins — why should I believe you? Why should I trust the account of a son of Seiryuu's murderous Hin?"

Aoiketsu hesitated for a moment. Then he frowned.

"My father was a soldier. Just as I am." He said quietly, meeting the Emperor's gaze. "The ways of war are kill or be killed. He killed your father, Heika — for that deed I'm sorry. But he was also slain by Hikari's father. Because of that act, I never knew the man who gave me these eyes. I have not known for most of my life who he truly was, the man who sired me into this world. I don't blame Hikari for that. I don't even blame her father. Tamahome was a soldier too. He fought for Kounan. He helped win them the war. Nakago's death was a sacrifice of warfare. Such is the rule of life and death, when you're a soldier."

Reizeitei's eyes widened at this, and for the first time Aoiketsu saw a flicker of doubt in his opponent's beautiful eyes. He hesitated, then took a gamble, reaching up to push the sword aside.

"I came here as a spy, and as the son of a man you despise." He added softly. "But I won't hurt Hikari. I intend to protect her, even if it kills me. I believe in her — that she's the one who will save my land as well as yours from destruction and pain. Besides, it's more than that. I… I care about her and I won't let anything happen to her. She is… too important… for me to let her down."

Reizeitei pursed his lips, his gaze flitting briefly to his sword as slowly he lowered it to his side. Then he inclined his head, sheathing the weapon as he reached out to take Aoiketsu's hand in his.

"Forgive me." He said evenly, and Aoiketsu felt a giddy wash of relief flood over him as he realised he had faced down the Emperor and lived. "I have many regrets — much grief — for the loss of my Father. But when you speak like that, I realise… that you are in the same situation as I. My father and yours both… whoever they were and whatever they tried to achieve. Both of them were lost through the war, and both of us grew up without them there."

Aoiketsu stared at him uncertainly, unsure how to take this sudden change in demeanour, and Reizeitei smiled ruefully, releasing his grip.

"I had not intended to interrogate you quite so fiercely." He admitted. "But I… I admire my father a good deal. And I have had eighteen years in which to build up hatred of your father. It… I allowed Boushin's feelings to overwhelm Reizeitei's rationality just for a moment. I apologise."

"It… it's all right." Aoiketsu gathered himself, shaking his head. "To be honest, there's no reason for you to even speak to me civilly, Heika. I am a traitor and a spy — I did lie initially about my reasons for being here and I did come on Kutou's errand. But… I meant what I said. About Hikari. She… I… Kutou don't know about her. I swear. They sent me to find out — but I haven't told them anything about her or what she really is to Kounan. Myoume says that I'm meant to be here, with Hikari — that it was predetermined. But it's more than that to me. I… I care about her more than I've ever cared about any woman before. And if it kills me, I'll keep her safe."

"Even against the wiles of Kutou's Emperor and his companions?" Reizeitei asked softly. "I too have heard Myoume's prophesies, and if Chichiri has faith in them, so do I. If one of your own proves to be our enemy in all of this, will you fight him as though he were not your compatriot, in Suzaku's name?"

"If it's to protect Hikari, I'll do whatever I have to do." Aoiketsu said firmly, realising as he did so that he meant the words he spoke. "She means a lot to me. I won't let anyone hurt her."

Reizeitei paused for a moment, eying him. Then he nodded, resting his hand on the soldier's shoulder.

"Then you are now in my trust, Kaiga Aoiketsu." He said quietly. "Do not let me down."

Aoiketsu started in surprise, gazing at the Emperor in disbelief, and Reizeitei smiled again, the faint glimmer of something other than Imperial will in his gaze.

"You and I are of an age. Of a generation." He reflected. "If I truly seek peace for Kounan, I must reach out, not carry blame. I do not think I will ever forgive Nakago for taking my father from me or for stealing from Kounan one of its best Emperors. But it was not your deed. It was his. And I will not stain the living with the sins of the dead. You mean it, I think, when you say you will protect Hikari from harm. You know how precious a treasure she is to Kounan, now. That you're willing to say you'll defend her even until death… gives me

some comfort. Perhaps, if more in Kutou think as you do, there is a chance for reconciliation after all."

"Kutou do not want war with Kounan." Aoiketsu said gravely. "Whatever else I know, Reizeitei-sama, I know that. The Emperor has always been adamant that he doesn't want to antagonise your people into re-igniting the conflict. I think… maybe… they're a little afraid of you and the stability Kounan now has. Because Kutou's history seems to be full of bloody invasion campaigns, they half expect you to act in the same way. Kintsusei-sama doesn't want to fight you. He wants to stop the civil war within the Eastern borders… that's all. It's the only reason I was sent here — the only reason he's at all interested in the Shinzahou at all. Whatever horrible things Myoume's seen — and they are horrible, because she made me see them too — they're not because of the Emperor. Even she says that. Kintsusei-sama would like there to be peace, I think, between our lands."

"Well, perhaps you are the advance guard of such an ambition." Reizeitei reflected. "Although something of great evil lurks in the East. You are not ignorant of that, I hope? Your patriotism has not blinded you completely?"

"I know there's something — some*one* — acting there in their own interests and that if we let them get all of the Shinzahou together, this world is doomed." Aoiketsu agreed. "And that person is Kutou's enemy as well as Kounan's, so I'll fight them with all I have."

Reizeitei leant back against one of the ornately carved pillars, considering this, and Aoiketsu realised that despite his expensive robes and ornate coronet, he was seeming less and less like an Emperor and more and more like a young man who could easily have been his comrade, if circumstances had been different. He frowned, a little unsettled by this realisation, and Reizeitei eyed him quizzically, a question in his glance.

"Something troubles you?" He asked softly, and Aoiketsu reddened, shaking his head.

"No." He said awkwardly. "I just… couldn't imagine having to be Emperor, that's all. Making all those decisions for so many people. I've had so many things conflicting over the past few weeks — I'm barely able to keep all of them in check. You're the same age as me, Heika — but all of Kounan relies on you for answers. It must've been difficult to grow up that way… to always be the one with the final word."

"Being Emperor is a lonely business." Reizeitei agreed pensively. "But a necessary one and one my father entrusted to me when he gave

his life on the battlefield. In the end, the Emperor is the people's man — he acts only on their interests, not on his own. At least, those are the principles my father died by. And I try to live by them as well."

Aoiketsu hesitated for a moment. Then he bowed his head towards his young companion.

"On behalf of my family, then, I want to apologise officially for the death of Lord Saihitei." He said quietly. "Even though the deed was committed before we were born, and without our involvement. Myoume says she feels a blood debt over Jin's death, and I understand a little for the first time what that means. I've always been raised as Kaiga Aoiketsu — the man I believed was my father was capable of horrible things, and I've always felt guilty, whenever I've thought of them. This is somewhat the same way. Nakago can't take back his deed. He can't apologise for his act, or make peace with you over it. But I can. Even as a soldier of Kutou, Heika — I can and I will."

He raised his gaze, seeing astonishment sparkling in the young King's golden gaze.

"I will fight and protect Suzaku no Shinzahou at whatever cost." He said evenly. "I will act in Kounan's name in this battle, as repayment for my father's actions. He hurt Kounan and caused the war in which many people died."

He glanced at his hands.

"I understand for the first time why Kintsusei-sama saved my Commander from slavery, even though it was only one man and it was all he could do." He added. "Because it *was* all he could do… so he did it. He was only a soldier then — not an Emperor able to give commands or change laws. So he did the only thing he could manage to do, to try and make up for the things his father did. He saved Hyoushin-sama and gave him his life back."

"When you speak like that, there's a spark of something else about you." Reizeitei said slowly. "Almost as if, somewhere deep inside of you, Seiryuu is lurking."

"I don't know about that." Aoiketsu grimaced. "At least, I'm not a Seishi and I don't have the power my father did — just like you and Shishi don't, Heika. I'm just a soldier, even if I am a good one, and even if I have been educated to a higher level than most of my comrades. I just think… Kounan has the things that Kutou doesn't have. And it makes me more determined to fight for them… and to prove to the South that people in the East aren't all murdering double-crossers. Because we're not. At the end of the day… we just want

peace too."

Reizeitei smiled, his golden eyes lighting up with hope.

"Then that makes what Hikari and her friends do ever more important." He said decidedly. "To save Kutou from itself. Aoiketsu, you are not an ordinary soldier, are you? You said yourself you have been educated beyond that — the way you talk seems almost as though you have been taught things that would normally only be taught an Imperial son, or a son of the highest level noble elite. Is that the case?"

"My mother died when I was born, and the last thing she asked of the Emperor and my Commander was that I be educated as though I was really a member of the Kaiga family." Aoiketsu nodded. "They've been at court for generations and Kaiga Gin was one of Shoukitei's closest allies… even though I'm bastard born, she wanted to ensure I had every opportunity available to me. It's always been my intention, when Kutou has peace, to take the exams and become an official at court — so I paid attention to everything."

His finger brushed the ring on his right hand, then,

"When I was eight, Hyoushin-sama gave me this ring." He added. "And told me that it was a charge from my mother that I was to do all I could to fight for Kutou's future. That it was her message to me, from beyond death — to do all I could do to support Kintsusei-sama and help Kutou. I've always worn it — as much as a memento of her as anything — but now I'm starting to understand that everything I've been taught had a purpose. My literacy, my navigation skills, my understanding of Kutou's politics… they're all starting to make sense. As if this… was what my mother wanted me to be here for. I just… didn't anticipate that I'd be doing my fighting for Kutou from underneath Suzaku's shadow. That's all."

"Chichiri said that our lands have to stop fearing one another, however." Reizeitei said frankly. "I have faith in Hikari's coming — I believe just as my father did when Miaka-sama came that she can make a difference. This too is Miaka-sama's doing, in some respects… the ways of the Priestesses are always mysterious. But I believe in them. And if it is Suzaku's will that Hikari help save Kutou too, so be it. And then we can look to the future. I would like to reduce the border patrols and relax the guard on the Eastern perimeter… maybe one day it will become a reality."

Aoiketsu hesitated for a moment, then he sighed, shaking his head.

"Kounan is not at fault." He said reluctantly. "The poison is in

Kutou. I don't like admitting it, but it's always been that way. That's probably why it hasn't been saved. Hyoushin-sama always says that people are as much responsible for the state of our country as the inattention of the God… and he's right. It's Kutou that's at fault. It's Kutou who causes its own suffering. I thought it was Kounan — that it was at our expense that your land got peace. But it isn't. It's nothing like that. And that's a hard thing to face up to, but if it's how it is, then we'll just have to do something about it."

"This Hyoushin sounds like an intelligent man." Reizeitei said softly. "Your Commander, did you say?"

"Yes. Of Kutou's Imperial Guard." Aoiketsu nodded. "He's the man who trained me to fight in the first place… and who ensured my mother's wishes were carried out."

"Then there is some hope for Kutou yet." Reizeitei smiled. "All right. Your companions will wonder if I have slain you, if we keep them any longer than this. Return to the Eastern Village with Chichiri and the others, and continue to do as you have promised me. I will trust you, Kaiga Aoiketsu. I believe you mean your words, and I will look to you for proof that Kutou's people seek, in the end, peace with Kounan. You are speaking for your whole nation with your actions in this land — do not let me down."

Aoiketsu hesitated for a moment, then he bowed his head to the young Emperor again.

"I won't forget." He promised. "I'll do my best, Reizeitei-sama. No matter what… and also, so long as I'm in Kounan, *nothing* will happen to Hikari!"

So this was Kounan.

Hyoushin rested his hands on the windowsill, gazing out pensively across the tiled roofs of Kahou's busy streets as he pondered the previous few days. It had not been an easy journey south, he mused, as he watched a family of traders loading up a cart as if preparing for a day's trading in the nearby capital city of Eiyou. Though there had been no obvious pursuit, both he and Maichu had been constantly aware of the possibility and had concealed themselves as best they could when crossing the southern border. Now they had reached the city in which Kayu had hidden during his time spying, and Hyoushin found himself glad that Maichu at least was familiar with the local terrain.

"Thankfully, since he and Kayu exchanged information here, he

knows something about the geography and that must work to our benefit." He reflected, leaning up against the cool glass as his gaze darted back towards his still-sleeping companion. The soldier was curled up on the floor of the tiny chamber, still lost in dreams and as Hyoushin watched him, he felt a stab of anger rise up inside of him for how things had come to be.

"This problem is mine. Not his." He reflected. "Yet his loyalty to me has brought him this far. I will not let harm befall him, even if it may be difficult to prevent. He is not a traitor, and if that is what Kintsusei-sama believes me to be… well, then I shall simply have to take responsibility for Maichu's actions as well. I can always say I forced him to come with me, after all. There will be no blood spilt over me… of that I am absolutely sure."

As if he had heard the older man's thoughts, Maichu stirred, opening his eyes as he gazed around him in blurry confusion. At the movement, Hyoushin moved away from the window, and Maichu scrambled into a sitting position, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Hyoushin-sama?" He murmured, and Hyoushin nodded, putting a finger to his lips.

"Better you don't use my name so loudly, even inside this room." He cautioned. "We do not know if people seek us, and just because we are now deep within Kounan's territory does not make us safe."

"True. Sorry. I forgot." Maichu admitted sheepishly, glancing around him as he pulled himself to his feet. "What time is it? It feels like dawn."

"A little after. The sun rises early in the south, but it will probably be another hot day." Hyoushin responded. "We have reached this far thanks largely to your guidance, Maichu — but we must not tarry here when we have a definite objective in mind. Tell me, how familiar are you with the western area that Aoiketsu was making his base? I know that Kayu travelled to the village — but did you?"

"No." Maichu shook his head regretfully. "Souun was as far as I went, but only on the one occasion and only briefly. I know that it's deep into bandit territory, and that the village Aoi was hiding in was one of the ones around the foot of the mountain known as Reikaku-zan. But more than that… I don't know. I'm not even sure of the path between it and Souun, or what it's actually called."

"Well, even despite that, you have done well." Hyoushin assured him. "This is my first visit to Kounan. Without your memory, my progress would have been much slower."

He sighed, glancing out once more at the ever more busy Kahou streets.

“I am sorry, Maichu, for involving you in this.” He murmured.

Maichu’s eyes widened, and he shook his head.

“You didn’t.” He said stolidly. “*I* did. I made the decision to come even before Suiko gave me your sword. I told you, sir — you’re not a traitor. And we’ll find Aoi and prove it somehow… even if I haven’t a clue how.”

“Yes, it is a problem.” Hyoushin admitted, folding his arms as he leant back against the wall of the chamber. “And disguising myself as a random Meihi tribesman was only a successful ruse whilst in the northern territories. This far south my people are unheard of — and no wonder, if this wretched heat is Kounan’s normal climate. Meihi attire is not designed for hot sun — and nor, I fear, am I.”

“It is hot.” Maichu admitted. “But I prefer it to Sairou’s desert and Hokkan’s snow. But then you don’t feel the cold in the North, do you…? So I suppose this must really suck.”

“It is not ideal, but for the time being, it is better than the alternative.” Hyoushin mused. “I am exiled, after all — but that only means I cannot enter Kutou’s borders. It does not stretch to Kounan. Although I can imagine that… my presence here would be ill-received in the East. If, of course, it was to be discovered.”

Maichu was silent for a moment, chewing on his lip as he digested this. Then he sighed.

“We’re really in deep shit here, aren’t we?” He asked softly, and Hyoushin’s expression became grave. Slowly he nodded his head.

“Yes.” He agreed. “And it may yet become more dangerous. I am now certain that the enemy in Kutou must be that sly priest Kikei — for he has control of so much in my absence, and — dare I say it — may even be manipulating the Emperor without his awareness. He has Miramu on hand to carry out his dark deeds, and he has effectively two Shinzahou and divine relics in his hands, also. He is not a man to be ignored — and we do not know what his ultimate plan is. Kikei is the one who placed Kintsusei-sama on the throne — so I do not believe he is looking for the man’s death. He must know that even in Kutou’s unsteady climate, the death of the last surviving Imperial prince would be disastrous. But I imagine that he wishes to increase his power… perhaps by removing me he feels he has more of a chance to influence Kintsusei-sama. I have, after all, always been in his way.”

His gaze narrowed.

“When Kintsusei-sama was first crowned, he insisted I be with him as his protector from then on.” He added. “He did not abandon me in the way Kikei expected. Rather he took me with him, and gave me a position whereby I was always able to watch over him. I have done so for the past eighteen years. Kikei must be heartily sick of me… and no doubt has long desired my removal. This prediction of Toroki’s was surely the final weapon he needed to achieve it.”

“But do you think Toroki’s prediction meant something? For sure?” Maichu asked hesitantly. “Aoi definitely thought so — but do you too, sir?”

“I do.” Hyoushin admitted. “Toroki is a woman of the West. The likelihood is she has never met Kikei — and she cannot possibly know that he is a Hin, when only I and the Emperor were party to that information. Yet she told us in no uncertain terms that a tribesman would betray his King. And so events are unfolding.”

“But… what does that mean… for Kayu and I?” Maichu frowned. “Because she… said things to us too. And Aoi seemed to think that so long as I was in Kounan I was potentially in danger.”

“I imagine that this is what she saw. This gamble of ours south to find your friend.” Hyoushin said heavily. “I can think of no other thing except that Toroki expected you and Kayu to be enemies, not friends. She was surprised to see you together, as comrades — but this now explains it. Kayu is Kikei’s puppet, without a doubt. But he has still acted against me. And you have chosen to support me. Which means…”

“Kayu and I are now enemies.” Maichu murmured. “Shit. She was right after all.”

“So it would seem.” Hyoushin nodded. He hesitated for a moment, debating whether or not to mention his other fears, but as he remembered how young his companion was, he decided against it, turning back to the window instead.

“There is no sense in my telling him that this rift between him and Kayu may have a more sinister edge to it.” He reflected to himself. “Toroki’s words seem to hint at more than just a choosing of sides. And if she has since said to Aoi that danger awaits Maichu in the south… but I must not dwell on it. I may be reading more into her words than she intended to say. For the time being, I will do all I can to ensure he is safe. His loyalty should not be punished, after all — with accusations of treason and threats of death.”

“Hyoushin-sama, are you sure that Aoi’s really come back this far south?” Maichu came to stand beside him, casting him a questioning look. “You said you saw him in Hokkan — might they not still be there?”

“I don’t think so.” Hyoushin shook his head. “They couldn’t retrieve Genbu’s treasure and the girl — Hikari — spoke in no uncertain terms about Suzaku’s Shinzahou. That they would hurry back to the South in order to protect it seems logical. And Aoiketsu seems to be one of their party — I imagine he would go where they did.”

“I wish it all made more sense.” Maichu admitted. “I believe in Aoi — I mean, he said it wasn’t treason, and if you’re right about that girl, then obviously it’s not. But… even so…”

“It is a complicated situation and one which must be handled carefully.” Hyoushin inclined his head. “So it is. I think the best course of action is for us to try and locate him — and if we possibly can, apprehend him on his own. We do not know what kind of reception the Southerners will give us, even if we do not mean to cause them harm. Until we have spoken to Aoiketsu, I think it is wiser to keep our distance from them. However…”

He glanced up at the sky, already becoming rich and blue as the sun drew higher over their heads.

“We don’t know what’s happening in Kutou, and time may be of the essence.” He said softly. “I cannot imagine Kikei will discard me and then let me live. I am awaiting Miramu’s coming, Maichu — I expect it, and the only reason he has not yet come must be that he has not yet firmly chartered our movements. But he knows Kounan as well as you do and he will find us. We need to find Aoiketsu and have a plan of action in place before he does. I am not afraid of fighting the assassin — or even of trying to kill him, if it is the only option open. But I don’t want to attract undue attention. And, most of all, we have a duty to Kintsusei-sama to succeed. Whatever is going on back home — I feel sure that he has need of us.”

“Miramu, huh.” Maichu rubbed his chin. “Commander… Aoi told me that he was… Byakko’s. I mean, that he has another name than Geiyo Miramu, and he’s been keeping it a secret.”

Hyoushin’s expression became grave, and he nodded.

“Amefuri.” He agreed. “Yes. I am aware, Maichu. Although I confess I was not so informed when we travelled to Sairou. This information I discovered later… too late, unfortunately, to prevent him from taking a man’s life in the shrine of Kitora. I am afraid that

act may well cost us dear when assessing our chances of negotiating with the Southerners. This boy — this bandit Jin — seems to have been honoured by the Emperor Reizeitei himself."

"Yeah. I got that feeling too." Maichu agreed. "But more importantly, sir, if Miramu is… then he's a lot more friggin' dangerous than we thought, isn't he? Because if he's a Seishi he has some kind of powers that we ain't seen… and…"

"Miramu is a shadow." Hyoushin sighed. "He appears and disappears at will, concealing himself from those around him. That is his talent — his 'power', as you call it. And in his line of work, it is an asset. Yes, Maichu. He's very dangerous indeed. And even when we do not see him, it does not mean we should not guard against him being there."

Instinctively Maichu glanced around him, and Hyoushin pursed his lips.

"I trust not quite so close as that — not yet, anyhow." He said evenly. "But I suppose time will tell. It would serve us best to keep moving — and to find Aoiketsu as soon as we can. He may, after all, be able to tell us a way to evade the man's attention completely. He has spent time with Toroki — and increasingly I feel we are going to need her assistance too if we are to resolve any of this."

Maichu did not answer immediately, and Hyoushin was aware of the keenness of his companion's gaze as he raised dark eyes to his Commander's amethyst ones.

"How *are* we going to move any further without people staring?" He asked bluntly. "You said yourself, sir, the Meihi don't exist this far south. And dressed like that… you freak me out, to be honest. It conceals your sword, but even so… you look… like someone other than Hyoushin-sama. You stand out more, somehow, than you did before."

Hyoushin's lips twitched into a faint, rueful smile at his companion's innocent words. A fleeting memory of his encounter with Bakaru and the Meihi flashed across his thoughts, and he nodded his head.

"Perhaps I *am* someone other than Hyoushin, right at the moment." He murmured, and Maichu frowned, confused.

"Sir?"

"Nothing of importance. Just a passing thought."

“Oh.” Maichu looked doubtful, but he shrugged his shoulders. “All right. But… how are we going to hide you? I mean, no offence, sir, but…”

He trailed off, and Hyoushin nodded again.

“I fear that no matter where I am, standing out is unavoidable.” He said evenly. “You are correct, of course, but to wear the fighting attire of Kutou’s army would be even more suspicious.”

He reached up to touch his scarred cheek.

“And in Kounan, even if I was to adopt the guise of a slave, it would not protect us from interest. Suzaku’s land has never had a legitimate slave trade and we might lay ourselves open to other kinds of trouble.”

“The guise of a…” Maichu faltered, and Hyoushin saw indignation flare in his dark eyes. “Like hell am I ever going to pretend to be a slave owner! I’m sorry, sir, but even *I* have my limits where orders are concerned. Even if you told me to — there’s just no way in hell!”

Hyoushin rested his hand on the young man’s shoulder, somewhat reassured by his vehemence.

“I’m glad to hear you feel that way.” He admitted. “Very well. There is no other way around it — we must just continue as we are and hope for the best. To stay in Kahou is not beneficial since Aoiketsu is probably further west. I would sooner bypass Eiyou if at all possible — since the capital is a likely place to encounter trouble — and head for this ‘Souun’ place you mentioned. I feel certain that, from there, we may find the village in which your young friend currently stays. After all, he is in the company of Suzaku Shichi Seishi. I cannot imagine that their residences are unknown.”

“Then we’re moving on to Souun?”

“We are.” Hyoushin grimaced up at the sky once more. “With any luck, we will get the worst of the journey over before the sun reaches its highest point. It is unpleasant to travel in, and I do not wish to hold you back.”

“It really affects you, doesn’t it?” Maichu realised, and Hyoushin nodded.

“My people are snow-people.” He agreed. “We’re built to withstand mountain snowfall. We’re not built for the hot south. But this is how it is, and I will manage, somehow. We have, after all, more important things to concern ourselves with than an inhospitable climate.”

“If that’s the case, we should leave right away.”

Maichu reached for his sword, hooking it to his belt as he cast his companion a grin. “Sooner we find Aoi, the sooner we can save Kutou.”

Hyoushin hesitated, then followed suit, even as his young travel companion unlocked the chamber door.

“And the sooner we leave Kounan, the sooner I can stop worrying about the safety of either one of you.” He muttered to himself. “I pray I haven’t brought either of you to the South merely to throw away your lives… this quest of ours becomes more dangerous by the second. How far will any of us have to go, I wonder, in order to bring peace to Kutou?”

Chapter 3

Chapter Two

So, all was going according to plan.

Kikei folded his hands together inside the voluminous folds of his heavy robe sleeves, allowing a faint smile to touch his lips as he considered the day's events. Early that morning, Kayu and his band of confused, tired travelling companions had returned to the palace and, having heard the young soldier's report on events in the north, the Priest had acted immediately, ordering them to take a day's discharge whilst he consulted the Emperor. It was, he knew, a sleight of hand that had prevented Kayu from reporting to Kintsusei himself — but he had sensed the boy's relief as much as anything else, and Kikei knew that to broach the subject of Hyoushin with his king would be a difficult thing for anyone.

"But I will put it to him so that he cannot refute me." He reflected, narrowing his beady black eyes as he contemplated the situation carefully. "Kayu does not need to speak to him. I have told the lad that I will handle all of that for him, since he has already experienced enough traumatic events and he has done his Emperor's bidding well. That Hyoushin did not fight it makes my job easier. Perhaps he did so to protect these Meihi he suddenly seems interested in — but that's no concern of mine. Slaying tribesmen in a foreign land holds no interest for me, after all."

"Kikei, I want to know what's going on."

At that moment the door of the shrine flew back to reveal Kintsusei himself, and the Priest started, turning in surprise to face his sovereign as he took in the expression on the younger man's face. Kintsusei's black eyes glittered with both indignation and anger, and from his stiff, confrontational demeanour, Kikei guessed that he had already heard something about Hyoushin's dismissal.

He steeled himself, bowing his head towards his King as he formulated what he wanted to say.

"Kintsusei-sama." He said softly. "Something troubles you, that you are come here without due ceremony? Not that I object, but is it not more seemly that I come to report to you rather than you demean yourself by coming to see me?"

“Enough with that.” Kintsusei said impatiently, and for a brief moment Kikei was reminded of the young and impetuous soldier that his carefully sculpted Emperor had once been. “I want to know what you know about Hyoushin. He didn’t return with the others, and all I’ve managed to glean is that, somehow, it’s your affair. So I’m coming to find out the truth from you… as your Emperor, I demand you tell me everything you know.”

“Tou Hyoushin is a traitor to Your Highness.” Kikei said gravely. “It pains me to tell it but it is true. In the mountains in Sairou, Toroki of Byakko made a prophesy before him and two of his young companions — Shi Maichu and Hei Kayu. Kayu reported it to me in full, and asked for my counsel. The prophesy made it quite clear that a man of Meihi birth would attack and betray the Emperor of Kutou. With great concerns for your safety, my Lord, I decided it was best to take immediate action to protect you.”

“A man of…?” Kintsusei’s eyes widened, then he shook his head, banging his hand down against the priest’s plinth with a sudden show of temper. “Ridiculous! Hyoushin is the one man in Kutou in whom I have complete faith! How could you be so quick to assume, Kikei? You know Hyoushin’s record as well as I. You know he has done nothing but serve me loyally since the day we met. Why would you act in this preposterous manner? And why was I not consulted before any decisions were taken?”

“On the contrary, sire, it was my understanding that you were aware of all of these things — in fact, it was my direct order that you be consulted.” Kikei affected a look of surprise. “It is true that I wrote a letter to Kayu regarding the dismissal of your officer. The letter was duly passed to you for your official seal — when I next checked it to be dispatched, it carried such a mark and I assumed you had both read and confirmed the action. I do not understand — how would it come to be authorised if you had not yourself placed the seal against the parchment?”

“I did no such thing!”

“I see.” Kikei frowned. Then he reached into the folds of his robe, pulling out the folded sheet of parchment and handing it over. “Then this is a troubling situation, my Lord. You should know that I would never presume to act entirely without your approval. This is the letter Kayu brought back to me when coming to make his report. It was sent to you and, as it appears, authorised by the Imperial seal. You can see for yourself — there is no mistake.”

“*What?*” Kintsusei’s face drained of colour as he took the

parchment, unfolding it with trembling fingers as he registered the distinctive curl of the Imperial Kutou seal at the foot. “But… I did not… it was not…”

“You can understand my confusion, Sire.” Kikei offered a slight smile. “Since that is, is it not, your own mark?”

“It is.” Kintsusei let the paper slip from his fingers, dismay in his dark eyes. “But Kikei, you have to know that this was not my act. Not my wish.”

“Then I am sorry that I took such quick action and that it was allowed to depart without your approval.” Kikei said gravely. “I assumed by your silence that it was a topic on which you would rather not speak, and I sought to respect that wish — but I should have been more attentive. I will make stringent enquiries into how this could have occurred. Likely one of your clerks thought to save you time — but to appropriate the use of the Imperial Seal is treason and must be fully investigated.”

“For now, it’s more important to me to get to the bottom of Hyoushin’s situation.” Kintsusei said quietly. “Your letter speaks of a report — Kikei, what report is this?”

“Kayu’s report, sire.”

“Kayu’s report… from Hokkan?”

“Yes, sire.”

“And again, without my knowledge?”

“That I confess is correct, Sire.” Kikei sighed, moulding his features into an expression of regret and consternation. “In truth, I hoped it would end in a different way. When he first told me of the prophesy, it was my decision to keep it from you. I am aware that you have great fondness for the Meihi, although I admit I have not always understood the reasons why. I charged Kayu with the duty of discovering the truth. I hoped to exonerate Hyoushin. Instead it seems that what Kayu discovered was evidence of a plot against your Highness. It pains me to bring this news to you when I had hoped so much to avoid it — but the truth is inescapable.”

“I would like Kayu to make this report to me directly.” Kintsusei said flatly. “And hear exactly what it is he has to say.”

“If you insist, Sire, I will summon him immediately.” Kikei said softly. “However he has suffered greatly from this whole business. He is truly fond of his Commander, and he has not liked the position all

this has put him in. I sought to spare the boy's feelings a little — as you know, he is like a son to me in many respects, and I am quite willing to take blame or responsibility for his part in it onto my shoulders. He acted only on my instructions and in your interests — to face your Highness when you are so clearly upset would frighten him."

Kintsusei faltered. Then he sighed, closing his eyes briefly.

"Kayu brought the Shinzahou back from Hokkan?"

"He did." Kikei agreed. "From Kayu's own words, Hyoushin relinquished it without argument. He did not try and defend himself on the charges laid before him, Highness."

"And why was he not brought back here so that I could speak to him myself?"

"I sought to spare your Majesty's feelings, that is all." Kikei said frankly. "You are fond of him, and he has proven to take advantage of that trust. Yet I did not think you would wish to see him slain as a traitor before the noble court, as is the custom of our land. If he came here, and faced your justice, you would have no choice but to mete out to him the punishment due for treason. In acting this way — in exiling him — such a fate is spared him. And more importantly, Sire — spared you."

He rested his hand gently on Kintsusei's arm.

"I know you have always put faith in Hyoushin." He murmured. "You must realise how difficult such a situation would have been, to have to condemn one you trusted to such a grisly fate."

Kintsusei was silent for a moment, contemplating. Then he frowned.

"Another member of Kayu's party is also missing." He said softly. "Shi Maichu has not reported back to barracks either, has he?"

"You are aware of this, Sire?"

"I am." Kintsusei agreed. "I take interest in the safety of those in my trust. Can you also explain his absence?"

"Not clearly, no." Kikei admitted. "Kayu says that he was with them the night Hyoushin was dismissed, then gone by the morning. Hyoushin's sword had also gone. It seems either the boy left of his own accord to trail pointlessly after a shamed master — or he was taken by force without his comrades' knowledge. Either is possible. Hyoushin is an adept man and he is good at slipping into places

without being seen or heard. On Kayu's own evidence, Maichu is similarly skilled — but not overly perceptive. It may be he was lured into a trap and then forced to accompany Hyoushin wherever it is he has been taken. If not that…"

"If not that then he has chosen to keep faith with Hyoushin and defy your order." Kintsusei murmured. "Even though it came with the Imperial seal."

"That is the other option. Yes." Kikei agreed.

Kintsusei sighed, rubbing his temples as he took all of this in.

"Tou Hyoushin. Shi Maichu. Kaiga Aoiketsu. All men I trust that are beyond my reach at present." He whispered. "And Hei Kayu — to put him in such a position…"

He shook his head as if to clear it.

"Hyoushin and Maichu must be found." He said frankly. "And Aoiketsu must be retrieved from the South before he can become involved in this tangled mess. I understand your concerns about my feelings, Kikei, and in light of the seal I cannot fault your actions beyond the fact I was not initially informed. You have done it from kindness, perhaps — but an Emperor is not allowed to have personal emotions when it comes to the matter of Kutou's justice. I will see Hyoushin and Maichu both and hear their sides of the story. And then, when I have done so, I will decide what is to become of them."

"If they be traitors, sire…"

"If they so be, then they will face the same treatment as any traitor to my realm." Kintsusei said quietly, a flicker of something cold and determined in the depths of his dark eyes. "But just because of a prophesy, I am not willing to condemn people in my trust. I want to speak to Hyoushin and have him explain his own actions to me clearly before a noble tribunal. This is my decision, Kikei. I will rely on you to see that it is accomplished."

Kikei eyed him for a moment, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully as he took in the other man's resolute demeanour.

"Today you look and sound like a King for the first time in a long time." He reflected. "Because Hyoushin is in trouble? Or because he is no longer here to nanny your every whim and bar the way for more intelligent beings to progress themselves? I do not know. But even so, you do not suspect me. You are still blinded by your childish trust in the man who made you Emperor… and I shall use that, Kintsusei-heika. Your favourite is already doomed and he will not return to

Kutou again. I will see to it that you never have your tribunal — there are far more important things at stake."

"Kikei?" Kintsusei pressed, and the Priest nodded, offering a smile as he bowed his head towards his king.

"I will do as you ask." He acquiesced. "And I will also investigate the intriguing matter of the Imperial seal."

"Do so." Kintsusei hesitated, and Kikei saw a faint flicker of doubt in his dark eyes.

"I am running out of people in whom I can trust." He murmured. "And this land becomes ever more treacherous. Do not let me down, Kikei… I will be relying on you."

Kikei's smile broadened.

"You need worry about nothing." He said evenly. "I will ensure everything is carried out."

Kintsusei nodded. Then he turned on his heel, withdrawing from the shrine as he shut the door behind him with a soft click.

"Well, well. You are becoming such a consummate liar, Kikei-sama."

Miramu's voice from the back of the shrine made Kikei jump, and he swung around, cursing as he cast the assassin a glare.

"You have to stop sneaking around this place and eavesdropping on me." He said frankly. "You're not a spy. That's not your job."

"No. My job is much more interesting." Miramu's lips twitched into a smile as he casually leant up against the golden foot of the snarling dragon statue. "And I came here eager to begin, since I have a feeling I know what my next duty will be."

"You heard the Emperor's words?"

"Most of them, yes." Miramu nodded. "I was down in the vault beneath here, with the mages and the Shinzahou, and I heard his voice. I thought it might be an interesting show, so I came to watch — and he seemed uncharacteristically angry. Perhaps he is not entirely the well-meaning fool I thought he was, if he has a temper beyond his even words."

"He was a boy of fifteen when I first crowned him, and an impetuous, idealistic young man who feared nothing." Kintsusei agreed. "But he was not born to be a King. His birthdate was inauspicious and his mother not among Shoukitei's favourites, so he

was overlooked and neglected by his Imperial father and the court alike. When the unfortunate woman committed suicide, he was transferred into the barracks and effectively disposed of as battle fodder. Nakago was the only one who saw in him potential, then. Because of him, Kintsusei-sama was trained — but as a common soldier, not as a Prince of Kutou. Over time, his ideals have become his enemy. The cares of this land have brought him down and if not for that Meihi, I would have been able to have far more influence over his decisions than I have in fact been able."

"But he is angry because of Hyoushin's dismissal." Miramu reflected. "Should you not tread carefully, Lord Priest?"

"The Emperor still trusts me, because I was the one who gave him his crown." Kikei dismissed this with a flick of his fingers. "I have always championed his cause and helped to defend him. He has grown to rely on me… and now he will rely on me all the more."

"You will not kill him, then?"

"Not presently, no. Not unless it becomes unavoidable." Kikei shook his head. "He is a blood descendant of the right line — the only surviving claimant to the throne of Kutou — and he does have people loyal to him. if I can manipulate his actions, it does not matter if he still lives. To act in his name is easier than to act in my own, after all. But he must not be allowed to speak to Hyoushin or discover the true words of Toroki's prophesy. And that's where I rely on you."

"Of course." Miramu grinned. "And what about the boy? Shi Maichu? Do you really believe he left of anything but his own accord?"

"No… I think with the foolish loyalty of a young man he has gone after his leader." Kikei responded. "But Shi Maichu is the kind of man who will not function as a threat without his Commander at the helm. He has strength — a born fighter — but he lacks imagination. He has not even been able to master his letters properly, even with the quality of tuition he has received since his arrival at court. Take Hyoushin out of the equation and Maichu no longer becomes a problem. If you see him, you may kill him — but your focus is Hyoushin."

"I understand." Miramu kicked his foot idly against the base of the statue. "Hyoushin is strong and I do not want to meet his sword arm. It sounds like Kayu's attempts at relieving him of that deadly blade did not go so smoothly, and I am not much of a contact fighter if I can avoid it. My superior strength and resolve overcame the bandit in

Sairou, but Hyoushin is a man of years military experience and that makes him a very different matter. I will have to think very carefully about my tactics — I want to be able to enjoy it, after all. He told me I would not be able to kill him. I wish to show him that he's wrong."

"You take pleasure from this, Miramu."

"Yes." Miramu admitted. "The deaths of others rarely concern me at all, Kikei-sama — not since I slew my father have I felt anything towards the people I've laid out cold. Even the bandit who fought so hard for his life — even though I recall his name, I do not feel grief for his death. But with Hyoushin I feel… a sense of something else. Excitement, maybe. Determination, definitely. A challenge — but more than that. This man has survived invasion, slavery, and constant plots against the throne. He believes he is invincible and I like to create doubt. Perhaps I am taking more pleasure than I should from this assignment — but I confess, I am looking forward to it."

"You're soul twists ever further the longer I know you, you know."

"Perhaps that is your influence, Priest." Miramu said simply. Kikei laughed.

"Maybe." He acknowledged. "Very well. You have your errand. Go to it — there is no time to lose."

"Go to it? Without any indication as to where they might have gone?" Miramu tut-tutted. "What kind of a brief is that?"

"I think you and I both know where they would be headed." Kikei shook his head, and Miramu's eyes narrowed.

"You're thinking of Kounan, aren't you?" He said softly. "Of Kaiga Aoiketsu — the boy who Hyoushin thinks so much of."

"Yes." Kikei agreed. "The Emperor wishes him to return to court. I would tell you to kill him too, but I know you'll refuse. So I'll tell you this instead. Slay the Meihi. Remove him from the equation before he can reach Aoiketsu, if possible. Then, if he ever does return to Kutou, it will be too late for him to try to defend his Commander. Aoiketsu is not a traitor to Kintsusei in anyone's eyes — yet."

"I will not kill Aoiketsu." Miramu agreed. "I told you. I like him. And I find him interesting to play with. But not prey."

"I don't understand what you see in him." Kikei admitted. "Your partiality seems uncharacteristic in light of your profession. But I have no fear of a boy who will never see battle… his squeamish, weak-willed nature will make him no threat to us."

“Partiality, huh?” Miramu chuckled. “Yes, you might call it that. I think you underestimate him, Kikei. But I have no interest in killing him. It would not provide the challenge or the planning that bringing down Hyoushin will require. That will be my focus. I will take steps to ensure that he does not escape my ministrations — believe me.”

He ran his fingers thoughtfully over the pouch at his belt.

“I have many poisons, but one solution in particular springs to mind.” He added. “Don’t worry. However strong he is, it will be to no avail. For this poison there is no antidote and I am far more adept at hiding than he is. He will not survive many days longer — certainly not long enough for Kintsusei-sama to make contact with him. You have my word, Kikei — the Meihi is no longer your problem.”

Well, so they were home in Kounan.

Shishi paused in the shadow of the white-stone monument, for a moment just letting the gentle summer breeze ripple through her thick waves of red hair. She was alone that morning, for since they had returned to the South Aoiketsu, Myoume and Hikari had once more taken up residence in the Eastern Village, and she had headed up the mountain, a mixture of feelings running through her as she had made the difficult climb.

For an experienced mountain baby like Shishi, however, the scramble was nothing she couldn’t do in her sleep, and the previous night had seen her sleeping in her own bed, the relieved greetings of her parents still ringing in her ears as she had laid down to rest.

Yes, they had returned to the South. And yet, despite that, she knew it was far from over.

“We didn’t get the Shinzahou, Jin.” She murmured, taking a tentative step forward as she placed the palms of her hands gently against the clean white stone. “I wish I could explain to you why we didn’t… but I don’t even remember what took place. All I know is that something’s happened to me… and right now I’m not sure how to talk to Kashira or Okaasan about it. Last night, when I got back here, they were so glad to see me. Papa hasn’t hugged me like that since I was six or seven, and he looked drawn — like he’d been worrying about our trip even though he didn’t say anything like it. So I couldn’t say… that I’ve come back… different. That… in Hokkan… something changed.”

She sighed, resting her brow against the wall as she closed her eyes.

“I want to tell *you* about it.” She whispered. “I know you were there, in that border town. I know you protected me from those men. I know it was you, Jin — that Suzaku helped you, but it was still you. And… and so I want to tell you everything.”

She faltered, as if waiting for some sign that her friend’s spirit was flitting around the mountain resting place, but there was nothing except the gentle sigh of the wind in the trees high above her head. She frowned, running her finger across the black shell bracelet.

“Do-nee?” She murmured, and something flickered faintly inside of her, as she felt the mage stir at the sound of her name.

“So you are there.” She reflected. “You’ve been so quiet since this morning, I wondered if you still were.”

“*So long as you wear my bracelet, Shishi, I’ll always be here*.” Doryoku’s gentle, lilting words echoed apologetically inside her mind, and Shishi shook her head.

“Don’t start guilting me.” She ordered. “I told you, it’s all right. But you are going to keep your promise about helping me. So long as you know that… we’ll be fine.”

“*I would never break my word to you.*” Doryoku sounded horrified. “*Bachisu always taught me never to break a promise — I would not go back on what I said*!”

“Bandits don’t break promises either.” Despite herself, a faint smile touched Shishi’s lips. “All right. Then it’s settled. But first I have to do something — so pipe down for me, will you?”

“*He isn’t here, you know*.” Doryoku said softly, and Shishi faltered, her brow creasing as she glanced down at the bracelet once more.

“Pardon me?”

“*Jin. He isn’t here*.”

“How the hell would you know anything about that?” Shishi demanded, but even as she spoke she felt the gentle curl of Doryoku’s spirit settling itself more comfortably around her heart, and realised she already knew the answer.

“You can read my thoughts. And my memories. And everything I’m feeling too, can’t you?” She asked resignedly. There was a soft sound, then a single word in response.

“*Yes*.”

Shishi sighed, rubbing her temples.

“All right. Maybe he’s not here… I don’t know.” She admitted. “But the thing is, Do-nee… when I was with Bachisu-san, Jin *was* there. I saw him. He spoke to me. And Hikari… Hikari felt him there, too. Myoume as well. He was there… then. He… he protected me. And he… he promised to take care of Bachisu-san, because I… I couldn’t do anything to help him any more.”

“*I know*.” Doryoku replied gently. “*I can see it, Shishi. Feel it too. I know all of those things. But you don’t need Jin to protect you, do you*?”

“Because I have *you* now, is that it?” Shishi grimaced. “Is that what this is? Some kind of in-depth babysitting bargain between Genbu and Suzaku that now I’ve got you hanging around me, I don’t need anyone else watching over me?”

“*I thought you were a bandit who didn’t need protecting*.” Doryoku murmured, and Shishi’s eyes widened.

“Shit, whatever happened to the nice, gentle, complying Do-nee that’s been begging my forgiveness since we left Hokkan?” She demanded. “What kind of mage spirit are you, Doryoku? Be straight with me, because I’d rather know what I’m dealing with.”

“*I am Doryoku, mage spirit of Genbu and protector of the North*.” Doryoku told her evenly. “*I dislike violence. I dislike fighting. These things are things Bachisu-san also disliked. He was a gentle soul — and in that respect, he gained my trust and my wholehearted loyalty. His gentleness and my desire for peace complemented one another, you might say*.”

“So how come you’re now needling me about my attitude?” Shishi demanded, and to her surprise, Doryoku let out a tinkling laugh.

“*I like you*.” She said softly. “*Bachisu did too. I can see that in your memories, and I could sense it in his blood. But you are still very young, Shishi-chan. Your friend was right when she said I put a strain on your body and I do not wish to hurt you. Furthermore, your spirit is not like Bachisu’s. I would never have acted in the way I did in Hokkan if I had been with him. You and I are connected now, so elements of you have bonded with elements of me. And I am now determined to help you find your strength. Because that is what you yourself truly seek to do.*”

“I suppose that’s true.” Shishi admitted. “Aw, shit, I hate being on the mountain like this. It’s been hard enough dealing with Jin’s death, but when we’re away at least I have Hiki and the others and we’re not right on top of it. Jin was loved by everyone, not just by me. The atmosphere still misses him — and this great big thing doesn’t help.”

She kicked out at the stone absently, shaking her head.

“I wish he’d known how much I loved him, is all.” She said sadly. ‘Because I never really told him that. He always treated me like his kid sister and I always argued with him about it — I’d get all possessive over Kashira an’ always tell him that we weren’t, even though we acted like we were. But when he died, when he called me “little sister’, I realised that that’s what I was. And there was still a lot of shit I needed him to teach me.”

She gazed up at the sky, taking in the faint wisps of cloud that dotted across the expanse of blue.

“But he’s gone, and that’s how it is.” She said finally. “You’re right. He’s not here. Maybe he was there that time, and maybe he helped me. But it’s *my* strength that I need to use. Not his. Not Kashira’s. Not even yours, Do-nee. My own.”

“*I* am *part of your strength now, Shishi*.” Doryoku said gently. “*Didn’t you understand that? I told you. Parts of me have bonded with parts of you. Elements of my power run through you and always will, now. Even when we are separated — even if you come to take the bracelet off and seal it away somewhere. I am not like the mages of Seiryuu, Suzaku and Byakko. I have never been imprisoned, but handed down from person to person — those blessed with a divine spirit and a kind heart. In seeking you out, Bachisu probably didn’t even realise that he was acting as his ancestors have done for generations. My relic has always belonged among the people of the snow, because of all the Hokkan-jin, Genbu had the most faith in their sense of peace. Tenkou abused my power and weakened me — Bachisu was forced to abandon me. But even in light of those things, he was still able to find someone in whom he could entrust my power. The only difference is — you are not a Meihi. And you do not belong to Genbu.*”

“That’s not a problem for you though, is it?”

“*A kind heart is a kind heart, no matter what nation it comes from, Shishi-chan*.” Doryoku said solemnly. “*The people of this world are all people. Genbu was the first God to bring peace to his land because the Hokkan-jin were the first to realise that fact. Despite the suspicion, the suffering, the pain — the Genbu Shichi Seishi triumphed and set the benchmark for all other nations. Their success created the hopes of all the people in the other nations — that one day they too would find their Miko and bring peace.*”

“You know, the Hokkan-jin *are* always welcoming and friendly to strangers, no matter where they’re from.” Shishi realised. “And I

suppose that must be because they've been at peace for as long as they have. It's still tentative in Kounan — and the war with Kutou is still in living memory. Papa fought in it. Aniue did too. Chichiri, and all the other Shichi Seishi… but for Hokkan it's lifetimes ago."

"*Yes.*" Doryoku agreed. "*So Genbu doesn't need to bring them peace any more, does he? But he does need to help you help Hikari to bring peace to the East. I don't know how. Those things are beyond my ken. But all that matters to me is that your spirit is strong and your heart is true. And so they are. So I will help you.*"

"And I need to come away from this place and focus on what we have to do next." Shishi's expression became one of resolution. "All right. I think I understand. I need to really stop moping and feeling sorry for myself. Other people are suffering too… I'm not the only one who misses Jin, and it's not just me who's lost someone close to me. Myoume's been put through hell because of what that bastard brother of hers has done. Hikari's away from her own home, and her family, and even though she misses them she's putting herself in danger to help us, even though this world isn't her world. Aoi's come from a country wracked by civil war and desperate for peace — he's away from all the people he cares about and he's lost friends in battle already because of it. I need to quit being the whiny brat and do something to help. Jin would say that too. And he'd be right. I'm with you, Do-nee. Whatever you want to teach me, I'm game to listen to you."

"*You should tell your family, you know, about our pact.*"

"Perhaps." Shishi nodded. "But first I'm going to deal with it in my way. I'm not going to rely on other people forever. Not if I'm going to be Kashira one day. I'm not even going to rely on *you* beyond what you teach me, Do-nee. Even if your power has fused somewhat with my blood, and even if it is kinda useless pretending it's not there. I'm still going to learn to use it in my way, and I'm not going to call on you to take control of my body like you did in the shrine. *I'm* going to be the one fighting with this body. All right?"

"*I already promised that.*" Doryoku sounded worried again. "*Don't you believe me*?"

"No, I believe you." Shishi relented. "You already told me, you don't break promises. So it's fine. While we have some time — while Hikari's asking Chichiri about her magic — I want you to teach me whatever you can about Genbu, Doryoku. And more importantly, how you and I can work together to help all of these things come right."

“Thank Suzaku for that.”

At the edge of the woodland, just out of Shishi’s line of sight, Tasuki leant back against the tree he had been using to conceal himself, letting out a heavy sigh of relief. Although he had not been able to hear his daughter speak, he had guessed her errand when she had slipped out of the bandit stronghold early that morning, and something about the sight of the young redhead at the site of Jin’s burial comforted him.

Shishi had gone to Hokkan, and she had faced danger. But she had come back in one piece, and for that fact Tasuki was truly grateful.

“Guess I didn’t realise how much I was worrying about the cub till now.” He reflected. “But she ain’t cryin’ — she ain’t collapsin’ like she did when she came back from Sairou. An’ if she’s adjustin’ to Jin’s death some, we can too. It’s her it’s affected worst, after all. If she can go to his grave an’ speak to him without losin’ her composure, she’s startin’ to heal. Even despite everythin’, maybe sendin’ her out with that Myoume girl was the right thing after all.”

He frowned.

“But even sayin’ that… last night… she was quiet.” He remembered. “An’ she ain’t talkin’ to any of us about what she’s done in the North. Maybe it’s not so simple. I mean, shit, she’s back. An’ dammit, I’m glad to have her back. But… I wish I could put my finger on what it was in her eyes last night. Is she really my Shishi back again? Or is she still messed up over somethin’ she ain’t tellin’?”

“Well, so she made it back all right.”

At the sound of his friend’s voice, Tasuki started, turning and shooting his bandit second in command a rueful smile as he nodded his head.

“I ain’t stalkin’ her.” He said hurriedly. “Just she seemed quiet last night, an’ I didn’t know… I suppose I…”

He faltered and Kouji grinned, coming to stand beside him.

“She’s a strong kid. Just like her Pa.” He murmured. “An’ she’s still missin’ Jin, but that won’t stop her from fightin’. It was a shock, Genrou. For you, for me, for everyone. For her most of all… no matter how much she thinks she’s faced the rough edge o’ life up here, she ain’t had to deal with this before. You an’ me, we have. We understand what it means to lose someone like that. This is Shishi’s first time — but in the end, I think she’ll be all right.”

“She was tired last night, I guess.” Tasuki lounged back against the sturdy trunk, digesting this with a frown. “An’ I guessed she’d come here, first thing. But she didn’t seem to be breakin’ her heart this time. I guess I was worried jus’ because she ain’t told me a damn thing about her trip this time around. What she’s done, what she ain’t — like it’s somethin’ she can’t tell me even if she wanted to.”

“You sound like an anxious mother hen.” Kouji snorted. “Leave that to Anzu an’ snap out of it, huh? It doesn’t suit you to be followin’ the kid round tryin’ to second guess her motives. You ain’t never understood women an’ now isn’t a good time to start tryin’. Shishi’s growin’ up, that’s all. An’ she’s not got Jin to fall back on now, so she’s gotta find her own place a little. If you think about it, Genrou, you always talked to Shishi through Jin, or with Jin on standby to make sure it was all understood. It’s not like she’s changed. You just lost the person who used to translate for you. That’s all.”

“Guess that’s true.” Tasuki looked sheepish. “I do miss the kid, that’s for sure. He was a good bandit, Kouji. I’m pissed that he’s gone. An’ that there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Chichiri hasn’t been to the mountain today.” Kouji reflected, and Tasuki shook his head.

“He told me yesterday before he went to pick the kids up that he was goin’ to stay in the village a while.” He responded. “He thinks it’s better I don’t go there for a bit — to tell the truth, he’s probably right. You know what he said to me about that Aoi kid, after all? My temper might just not hold out if I remember his connections to that bastard Miramu.”

“Yeah, I know.” Kouji nodded. “But it just struck me that Chichiri might know more than you about their trip. Since that Hikari kid is stopping there…”

“I know.” Tasuki hesitated, then he sighed, shrugging.

“I wanna get it from the cub, Kouji.” He admitted. “I don’t pretend I understand how a teenage girl thinks, but dammit, I know there’s somethin’ on her mind. Even if she did just come to see Jin this mornin’…even if she was jus’ quiet last night. I can’t pin what it is, but somethin’ about her has changed. An’ I ain’t sure if I like it.”

“There’s that hen again.” Kouji warned. “I told you. Let her grow up. She ain’t a baby… she’s been let loose from the nest an’ she needs to learn, you know.”

“It isn’t that.” Tasuki’s gaze flitted out across the clearing to the

white-stone shrine, pursing his lips as he considered how best to explain it. “It’s… somethin’ else. I don’t even know what to say about it. I just… it’s there. Somethin’ about her. Somethin’ has changed. Inside of her. Somehow.”

Kouji was silent for a moment. Then,

“If they didn’t get the Shinzahou, they’ll have to go to Kutou, won’t they?” He said softly, and Tasuki slowly nodded his head.

“That’s what I think, too.” He agreed. “Even though Shishi ain’t said it, an’ I haven’t had a chance to speak to Chichiri. Since Jin died, Kouji, I’ve felt shut outta this whole thing an’ I don’t like feelin’ that way. Sure, I’m here to protect Kounan. I’m doin’ that — I’m always doin’ that. But I don’t like *bein’* protected like this. I’m pissed off as hell that Jin got killed. Angry, upset, an’ I won’t pretend I wouldn’t pull a sword on that Amefuri jerk if I thought I could get him good. But… if this is about Kounan — I should be involved. I *want* to be. And maybe Shishi ain’t talkin’ because she thinks I’m not, now. Because of Jin… she thinks I ain’t a part of it any more.”

Kouji laughed.

“Genrou, you’re getting soft in the head.” He said, amused. “Your few remaining sane braincells are finally turning inside-out on you.”

“I know.” Tasuki pulled a graphic face. “Maybe it’s Anzu — perhaps she’s infected me, because she was the first one who mentioned it at all. But even though that’s true… I can’t help but think… somethin’s up.”

“Well, let me put it into perspective then, Suzaku no Tasuki-sama.” Kouji said playfully. “This mountain o’ yours is gonna be stampeded by angry townsfolk if one of us doesn’t go down an settle the tradin’ tab an’ though I’m sure we’re more than well equipped to take on a shitload of bitter Souun residents, you’ll find we’ll be banned from all the taverns in the city if we don’t pay our owes. Reikaku-zan does have a reputation to keep goin’ in these parts, after all — we want the folk round here to trust us. If Souun stopped servin’ bandits, you might find you got a rebellion of quite a different kind on your hands here among the other men — an’ the cub will be the least of your worries.”

“*Trading* tab?” Tasuki stared, then, “Shit, that’s due today?”

“It was due yesterday, actually.” Kouji said frankly. “But with Shishi comin’ back an’ all, you were on another planet an’ you never gave the order. I would’ve done it myself, except that might’ve been

construed as mutiny an' you're the captain, Kashira."

"Shit." Tasuki cursed. "I really have let this whole thing get me distracted, ain't I? Jin's death, Shishi's bein' away — you're right, I've gone soft in the head. I'm a friggin' bandit, not a daycare nurse. I need to get my head together an' start focusin' on important stuff… else I'll have real problems to deal with here, won't I?"

"I don't think it's gone that far yet." Kouji patted him on the back sympathetically. "If you want me to, I'll go."

"No… this time I'll do it myself. I could use the time away from this lump of rocks to clear my head." Tasuki shook his head. "I'll go collect the coin an' leave right away. Take care of things here for me till I'm back, will you? An' if the cub comes lookin' for me, tell her I've headed to Souun but I'll speak to her soon as I get back. All right?"

"Understood." Kouji saluted him playfully, and Tasuki grimaced, cuffing his friend playfully as he shook his head.

"Don't." He warned. "Just because I ain't drawn the tessen yet doesn't mean I can't, so keep it in mind."

"Tell that to the innkeepers in Souun." Kouji teased. "I'll see you later. An' Genrou? Don't fret about the cub. Shishi's strong — she's got her father's spirit an' her mother's obstinacy. She'll be just fine."

Chapter 4

Chapter Three

The sun was climbing in the sky as Hyoushin and Maichu reached the mountain town of Souun, and as the two men stepped though the gateway into the busy city streets, Hyoushin paused to glance across at the intimidating mountain peaks that loomed over the bustling, rough-edged settlement. Somehow, framed by the summer light, the tallest of the range almost appeared in the form of a hunting wolf, and as he gazed at it, he realised that it was quite a different prospect from the snow-capped Koku-zan on which he and Maichu had sheltered some days before.

“A southern mountain, without a flake of snow or chip of ice in sight.” He reflected regretfully, as his clever amethyst eyes gauged the likely pathway beyond the crowded town. “Lush with vegetation on the lower levels, dry earth and rock at the peak. Not a forgiving mountain, I trust — and as we already know, the home of rogues. We must be careful in these parts — this is, after all, the region of Kounan which lives under bandit rule.”

He turned, taking in their more immediate surroundings as he tried to get the measure of what sort of town Souun was. It was clearly not a rich town, he reflected, for some of the houses had tiles that needed replacing and many of the facing walls were chipped and dry, badly in need of repair. The children that ran between market stalls wore patched clothing and a quick glance told Hyoushin that most of the adults were no better attired, many of them dressed in plain, simple fabrics that had long since seen better days. And yet, despite the obvious hardships many of the townsfolk faced, there was a sense of joviality and security in the atmosphere.

“The children may be without shoes, but they are not without laughter.” He murmured softly.

“Hyoushin-sama?” Maichu’s quizzical glance told the Meihi he had spoken aloud, and he smiled faintly, shrugging his shoulders.

“It is the same wherever we are in Kounan.” He said simply. “Have you not noticed? Even here it is the case. The people in Souun are not rich people, but they are also not oppressed. This is bandit country, is it not? Yet these people are happy and secure despite that. It seems an interesting conflict of circumstances. Do you not think so?”

“I hadn’t really thought about it.” Maichu looked surprised. “But we’re not dealing with ordinary bandits, are we? I mean, that Jin kid that Miramu killed, he was one of them — wasn’t he? And one of the Suzaku people is associated with them, too. So maybe they’re not like other bandits. Maybe it’s different. I don’t know.”

“I confess the more I see of Kounan, the more I am convinced that Aoiketsu has discovered something important.” Hyoushin admitted. “But I wish it was not so hot. That we should come here in summer is inconvenient. I am afraid that my progress is slower because of it — and I am holding you back.”

“I hadn’t noticed it, if you are.” Maichu said frankly, then he realised who he was speaking to and reddened. “I mean, it’s all right, sir. It’s not a problem.”

Hyoushin eyed him for a moment. Then he shook his head.

“Speak plainly, and do not worry about formality.” He said softly. “I am no longer your Commander, Maichu. I have been relieved of that position. And we are reliant on one another for our safety in this strange land. I would sooner you were not worrying about offending me. There is nothing that you can say which will perturb me. Your faith in me is much more appreciated than you know, after all.”

“I guess.” Maichu sighed. “Habits die hard, and all of that. It just sucks, that’s all. This whole thing — it sucks. You say you’re not my Commander any more, but you still are to me — and to Aoi too. And I still can’t call you anything else because of that. But I guess… travelling like this…”

He faltered, and Hyoushin knew his young companion was eying him carefully.

“You don’t look so fit.” He admitted. “And come to think of it, you ain’t eaten much since we’ve been in Kounan. Maybe we should stop somewhere an’ get something to eat an’ drink, huh? It’d be cooler, most likely, an’ I remember from when I was here before that ale in Kounan is worth the price.”

“It is not like we have much money, Maichu. Very little at all, in fact — only the money I carried with me when I was summarily dismissed.” Hyoushin reminded him, inwardly startled by the boy’s sudden perception. “As for my physical state, it is simply the heat of the day that tires me. It is difficult to find an appetite when faced with such an atmosphere. I am not unfit — my health is fine. It is, quite simply, a case of being too hot.”

“But hot can become dehydrated real quick.” Maichu said frankly. “It’s all right, sir. I mean, Hyoushin-sama. I have some coin too, you know. I have what’s left of the money you sent me to Kounan with in the first place. Because Aoi was so quick to meet with me, I never spent all of it an’ I never had a chance to give it back to you. Besides, if you collapse or something, we’ll attract attention to ourselves like crazy, won’t we?”

“I imagine we’ve already managed that.” Hyoushin said dryly, his gaze flitting to the townspeople, some of whom had already registered the appearance of strangers in their town. “I am not exactly inconspicuous.”

“I suppose not.” Maichu grinned sheepishly. “I’m sorry. I keep forgetting about that.”

“You keep forgetting about it?” Hyoushin stared at him, and Maichu shrugged.

“That you’re Meihi and that they don’t have those in the South.” He agreed. “I’ve been with you six years now and I’ve just got used to it — I guess I didn’t think about what people might do or say if it was the first time they saw someone like you.”

Hyoushin eyed Maichu for a moment, then his lips twitched into a smile and he rested his hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“I think I prefer your directness to your attempts at manners, Maichu.” he said softly. “And I will bow to your opinion. We will find an inn and get out of the sun — if just for a short while. It has struck me that we do not know Souun well, and nor do we know how to find our destination. We are an odd sight, perhaps, but in the seclusion of a tavern we might avoid so much attention. And we may come to learn something from the people around us — if we pay careful attention.”

“Yes, that’s true.” Maichu brightened. “All right, then. I remember that there is a busy inn on the corner of the next street — I think it’s the next turning, anyway. They seemed to have a lot of people coming in and out of there, the one time I came here. We should head for that — it’s not far, and I don’t remember their rates being unreasonable.”

“I see you enjoyed your visit to the South quite considerably.” Hyoushin observed, and Maichu reddened, shaking his head.

“I didn’t spend the whole time drinking.” He defended himself. “Honestly, I didn’t. But inns are good places to meet people. Aoi. Kayu. You know. It’s not like it sounds, sir. I promise.”

Hyoushin shrugged.

“Your knowledge is proving useful once again.” He said simply. “And I am in no position to criticise your methods, Maichu. I am no longer your Commander.”

“I wish you wouldn’t say that when I already told you it wasn’t true.” Maichu grimaced. “Please, sir. The Emperor did *not* authorise that letter and he didn’t agree to this. So you’re still the Commander. And dammit, it sounds defeatist when you talk like that… I don’t like it. You’re never defeatist — you’re always sure of the way to go and you always just get on with things. But since we left Hokkan — sometimes… you sound like… you’re not sure.”

“Perhaps that is closer to the truth than I would like to admit.” Hyoushin sighed, reaching up to run his fingers through his thick silvery hair.

To effect his disguise, he had discarded his warrior’s tail in favour of the more traditional Meihi style knotted at the base of his neck, but in their walk through the forestland of Kounan the ribbons that tied it in place had long since come undone and now his thick, straight hair fell loose around his face, adding to his discomfort in the warm midday heat. The woven fabric of the robes Lirayi had stitched for him hung heavily against his tall frame, and though he had not known how to own it, he felt certain that he was reaching the end of his walking tether.

“I will not discard what Rayi made for me.” He told himself, even as his fingers brushed against the black-stone pendant that still hung around his throat. “And I cannot see how else I can dress, and still maintain my guise as a Meihi. Since we left Hokkan, it has been my only defence — to claim my tribal heritage and pretend I do not understand Chinese. But here, in Kounan, dressed like this — I do not know how much longer I can manage it. It is foolish attire for such a hot day, and I must be crazy. Still, what other option do I have? If it were to be known who we really were…”

“Hyoushin-sama, are we going?” Maichu broke through his thoughts and Hyoushin nodded, falling into step with his young companion as they made their way towards the aforementioned inn.

“Maichu, I would like you not to use my name in public while we are in these parts.” He said softly, as they walked. “I realise it is hard to remember, but I must ask you anyway. My name is known to the people of Suzaku, and so is my face. We must not take chances and draw attention to ourselves if we can prevent it… do you understand?”

“Yes.” Maichu looked grave. “And I’ll try and remember. I’m just not sure what else to call you, sir. That’s the truth. If I can’t call you Commander, and I can’t call you… your name… what can I say? Just ‘you’ seems rude… even by my standards.”

At this, Hyoushin offered a faint smile, brushing his fingers against the stitching of his robe as he touched the black-threaded Meihi character for ‘peace’.

“There is one other thing you could call me.” He admitted. “*That* name is not my birth name, Maichu. You do know that, I think?”

“I guess I never thought about that, either.” Maichu looked sheepish. “But it’s true, isn’t it, that the Emperor gave you that name after he… when you met?”

“After he freed me from slavery.” Hyoushin nodded. “You may say it, Maichu. Avoiding it does not change its truth. Yes. That was the name he gave me, because I told him I did not remember my true name.”

“So that’s no use either, then.” Maichu sighed. “It was a long time ago, so I guess you wouldn’t remember, but…”

“Lilaihi.” Hyoushin cut across him, and Maichu stared, confused.

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“Lilaihi.” Hyoushin repeated. “That is my true name, Maichu. I was not entirely honest with the Emperor, when I told him I had forgotten. I simply *wanted* to forget — but I am coming to realise that I cannot. So you may use that, if you must use a name for me in public. Liliahi.”

“You must be kidding — I can’t even say that.” Maichu looked dismayed. “How the hell am I going to remember that, sir? It’s not even a proper name!”

“It is a Meihi name, Maichu.”

“I…” Maichu bit his lip. “Shit, I guess that did come out wrong. I meant it wasn’t a usual kind of name… or… oh, I didn’t mean it to come out rude like that. But shit, I don’t think I can even say it. I don’t speak Meihi. And…”

“Li. La. Ihi.” Hyoushin interrupted softly. “Repeat it, please.”

“Li… La…?”

“Li La Ihi.”

“Li..lai..ihi?”

“Yes. Close enough.” Hyoushin nodded. “It seems you are able to pronounce it adequately, so all that remains is for you to recall it. On the off-chance you will need to call me by any name at all — this is the one which you must now use. At least until we have made contact with Aoiketsu. Do you understand?”

“I… I guess.” Maichu looked doubtful. “If that’s what you want me to do. It sounds weird — it feels weird — but I’ll try.”

“No more strange for you than for me.” Hyoushin admitted. “The Meihi in the mountains were the first to call me by that name in almost twenty five years, Maichu. And it is not a name I take pleasure in remembering, for many reasons. But we have moved beyond the point of sentimentality and personal preference. We have a duty and we must fulfil it. And that means using all methods at our disposal. Including my past, if it be so necessary.”

“Lilaihi.” Maichu murmured. “Okay. I think I got it. It still sounds kinda strange, but… I’ll try and remember it.”

Hyoushin nodded.

“This is the inn you mentioned?” He asked, gesturing towards the busy, white-fronted building that fronted onto the end of the next street, and Maichu nodded.

“That’s the one.” He agreed. “I guess you want me to do the talking again, huh? Are we going to stick with the guise we’ve used coming south — that we’re traders?”

“Yes.” Hyoushin reflected. “It seems the easiest thing. In the North, at least, Meihi weaving and carving seems to be much in demand. From that perspective, it at least gives us a reason to be travelling together.”

“They’re going to think I’m a slave owner again.” Maichu grimaced. “But I guess there’s no helping it. All right. I understand… I’ll do as you say.”

As they entered the crowded, quaintly decorated tavern, many heads turned to stare at them, and from across the room a middle-aged man got to his feet, approaching them with a quizzical look in his eyes.

“Can I help you?” He said softly, his gaze flitting from Maichu to Hyoushin as he seemed to be sizing up the situation. “We’re real busy today, you know.”

Maichu frowned, glancing at his Commander, then shaking his

head.

“I can see that.” He said frankly. “But we’re just here to get out of the sun. My companion dislikes the summer heat, and we have an important meeting in the capital tomorrow. If we could just stop here a short while and refresh ourselves, then it’d be much appreciated. Kounan is hot in the summer, after all — and my companion is not accustomed to the weather.”

The man’s eyes widened as he eyed Maichu anew. Then he bowed his head, an apologetic look in his dark eyes.

“I’m sorry.” He said frankly. “I’d taken you for a slaver, given the fact your friend here bears the scar. You know slavery ain’t allowed in the South — an’ you with the look of the East about you, I thought…”

“I don’t believe in slavery. And nor do many people in Kutou.” Maichu said quietly, though Hyoushin could see the indignation in his dark eyes. “I’m not a slave owner. My companion is a skilled workman from the North, and we’ve come south in search of trade. But if you’re not willing to accomodate us… we can always go elsewhere.”

The innkeeper’s eyes opened wide with dismay and he bowed towards them again.

“My apologies.” He flustered a second time. “It’s just… you have to realise, in the past… this is Reikaku-zan land, and… the Kashira of the mountain doesn’t take kindly to slaving. That’s all. Your companion — the only time we’ve seen his kind in Souun before has been in those circumstances. And he is marked, so I thought…”

“He was a slave, but is no more.” Maichu said softly, and Hyoushin decided it was time he took a hand in the conversation. He raised his hands in a Meihi gesture of peace.

“I hope we will not inconvenience you by our presence.” He said quietly, speaking in his native tongue as he offered the innkeeper a faint smile. “We’re just passing through Souun, that’s all.”

The innkeeper stared at him as if he was mad, then,

“What did he say?” He asked Maichu. Maichu met his Commander’s gaze for a moment, then he shrugged.

“That he’s hot and tired and he’d like to take a moment to rest here.” He said evenly. “You’re fortunate — it seems my friend is happy to overlook your hostility, so so will I.”

“Doesn’t he speak Chinese?” The innkeeper asked, and Maichu snorted.

“He’s from the Northern mountains. Where would he have learnt that?” He demanded. “We can communicate, and that’s all that matters. Will you serve us, or will we be forced to go elsewhere?”

“Please, take a seat, both of you.” The innkeeper said hastily, indicating towards a free corner table, and Hyoushin cast Maichu a quizzical glance as if looking for further instruction. Maichu nodded his head, and Hyoushin made a Meihi gesture of thanks as they were guided to their seats. Before long they were served with cool, sweet ale and although he rarely drank alcohol, Hyoushin found himself glad of the coldness.

“Thank Seiryuu he’s left us alone.” Maichu took a sip of his own drink, sitting back with a sigh. “That was tough, you know. I hate the way they assume — but he was the worst of the lot. I guess these mountain bandits really have a thing against slavery.”

“A sensible stance.” Hyoushin murmured absently, running his finger along the rim of the glass. “Thank you, Maichu. You handled him well. Even if your Meihi translation leaves much to be desired.”

“Well, to be honest, sir, you could have told him you were a chicken and neither of us would have been any the wiser.” Maichu said sheepishly. “But I figured it didn’t matter what you actually said. Only what he thought you said.”

“It is good to be out of the sun.” Hyoushin admitted. “And the ale is indeed refreshing. Once again your knowledge has proven useful.”

“We could eat, while we were here. That guy’s up for bending over backwards to serve us, so we might get a discount.” Maichu mused, and Hyoushin shrugged.

“You may if you like.” He responded. “My concern is replenishing lost fluids and cooling down. I am not hungry, but if you are…”

“Sir, you need to eat, you know.”

“Yes, perhaps, but there will be time enough for that when the sun sets and it is less oppressive.” Hyoushin shook his head. “For now I am just grateful to have something cold to drink.”

Before Maichu could respond, the door of the inn swung open again to reveal a stranger, and at the sight of him many of the townspeople let out an exclamation, several getting up from their seats as they greeted him. Hyoushin frowned, trying to make out this newcomer in the midst of the flood of bodies.

He was tallish, though probably not as tall as Hyoushin himself,

and of approximately the same age, although there was a youth and spirit in his bronze eyes which gave him the appearance of someone still in his mid to late twenties. A shock of flame-red hair crowned his head, tapering into a long, bound tail down his back, and bright, gaudy gems hung from his ears, indicating that this was someone who was not afraid of making an impression.

He was robed in what appeared to be bandit attire, but there was a tailored showiness to his clothing, and although he wore a blade at his belt, it was the odd silver implement strapped to his back that attracted Hyoushin's attention more. It looked like a simple harisen, yet it glittered with the glint of cold hard metal, and for the life of him Hyoushin could not work out what it might be for.

From the interest of the patrons, he guessed that this man must be both popular in Souun and somehow associated with the bandit mountain. He soon found he was right, for the innkeeper that had spoken to them a short time before pushed through the swathe of bodies, bowing his head in greeting.

"Genrou-sama!" He exclaimed. "This is unexpected!"

"Unexpected?" The bandit spoke, his words touched with a rolling mountain accent, and he offered the man a grin, revealing fanged teeth as he did so. "I would'a thought you'd be tramplin' down the mountain lookin' for me considerin' I'm a day late payin' our dues."

"That's true." The innkeeper owned. "But a day's only a day when it's Reikaku-zan. And I didn't expect it to be *you* comin' down to pay us, Genrou-sama. After all…"

"Why not?" Genrou demanded, a playful note in his voice. "I drink here as much as any of the others, don't I? An' I can do my own dirty work — besides, it's my fault the damn thing got held up."

He reached down to unhook something from his belt, and Hyoushin could see it was a leather pouch which clearly contained coins. The innkeeper took it eagerly, glancing inside it and then nodding his head.

"As ever, it's good doing business with you, Genrou-sama." He said frankly, and Genrou laughed.

"I ain't surprised you say that, considerin' the amount of time we spend in your joint." He said ruefully. "We won't be late next month… we gotta set the example, after all. It would'a been here yesterday but I got tied up with things on the mountain — you know what it's like when women get involved. The best laid plans go to hell an' back

before you can make sense of them."

The innkeeper laughed, nodding his head.

"A day is nothing compared to some of the good-for-nothings who drink here." He said honestly. "If we can rely on anyone to keep their obligations, it's Reikaku-zan's men."

"Glad you think so." Genrou's expression became approving. "Well, you're obviously busy, an' I'm creating a distraction — so I'll leave outta here before I ruin your business. I got other errands to run yet."

"You're not drinking with us today, Genrou-sama?" One of the inn's serving girls shot him a surprised look, disappointment in her dark eyes. "Not even just the one? You've not been down to the city yourself in a while — we thought you'd forgotten all about us."

"Not today." Genrou shook his head, eying the girl with a mixture of wariness and amusement. "You can pout like that all you like, Maiki, but I got business an' I'm goin' to see to it before I think of drinkin' anywhere."

"I could always come with you and help." The girl asked hopefully, and the innkeeper shot her a dark look.

"Maiki, mind your manners." He warned her.

Genrou laughed.

"You never resist the chance to try your luck, kid." He said, amused. "But you should know by now that Anzu's more'n willin' to bring her sword out if she has to, an' one woman is all I can cope with. Let it go, huh? The mountain ain't no place for young girls like you — an' I'm near old enough t'be your father."

"I don't care." Maiki pouted. "I'm very mature for my age, you know."

"Maiki, go out the back and check the water levels, please." The innkeeper shot her a meaningful look, and Maiki's pout deepened, but she flounced obediently off in the direction he had indicated. Once she had gone, the innkeeper bowed his head towards the bandit apologetically.

"I'm sorry about her, Genrou-sama, an' the way she speaks to you each time you come in. If it wasn't that she was my niece…"

"The girl's got spirit about her, is all." Genrou shrugged, and to Hyoushin it seemed that he had almost liked the attention. "She jus' needs to pin it on a guy her own age. That's all. Like I said — one

woman's more than enough for this bandit to handle."

"Send our best to Anzu-sama an' the others." The innkeeper told him, and Genrou nodded his head.

"Be sure to." He agreed "And no doubt you'll see plenty more trade from us before the next due date."

With that he turned on his heel, sauntering out of the establishment with as much casual swagger as when he had come in.

"What the hell was all that?" Maichu frowned, and Hyoushin's eyes narrowed as he tried to work out what had been familiar about the bandit's lean, wolfish features and glittering bronze eyes. Somehow he felt sure he had met the man before, even though he knew he had not, but despite his best attempts his tired, sun-fogged brain would not pull together the memories and make the connection.

"Someone from the mountain." He said at length. "From Reikaku-zan, bringing money to the innkeeper. Maichu, I have a thought."

"A thought, sir?" Maichu drained his glass, setting it down on the scratched wood table surface as he eyed his companion thoughtfully. "Shit, these southerners are weird as hell. He must've been crazy to turn down that girl — she was pretty lookin' as well."

"Maichu, focus." Hyoushin said sharply, and Maichu grimaced, a sheepish look in his dark eyes.

"Sorry." He said apologetically. "I'm listening."

"That man — that Genrou — he's come from the mountain." Hyoushin said softly. "From Reikaku-zan. Which is where you told me Suzaku's relic was hidden — correct?"

"That's what Aoi said, before he went strange on me." Maichu agreed. "Why?"

"Perhaps it would be as well for you to follow this man, then… at least until you discover the best path to this bandit stronghold." Hyoushin pursed his lips. "After all, we know that the place Aoiketsu is sheltering is somewhat associated with that place, do we not? And if we can locate Suzaku's relic in the meantime…"

"Finding Aoi is more important, surely?" Maichu looked surprised. "And if I do that, sir, what will *you* do?"

"For the time being, I will remain here and see what I can learn under the protection of apparent incomprehension." Hyoushin told him. "I do not wish to throw you into harm's way, Maichu — but I

trust you can be careful. Do not attempt anything drastic on your own — simply discover the way to the mountain and whatever else you can. Do you think you can do that?"

"I'm not sure we should split up." Maichu said doubtfully. "You still don't look so fit, sir — you look tired and…"

"I'm sure I will be fine without your protection, Maichu." There was a note of irony in Hyoushin's voice, and Maichu reddened.

"That wasn't quite what I meant." He said hastily, and Hyoushin shook his head.

"The longer we argue it, the further away he will be." He said wisely. "Go now, Maichu. Do not worry about me. I will rest here a while and then conduct enquiries of my own. We will rendezvous at this same time tomorrow… that should be adequate for you to find out what we need to know. I would go myself, but… in this heat…"

"No, it's okay. I'll go." Maichu assured him. "If you think it'll be useful. And I'll report back here tomorrow at this time. You can count on me."

"Yes, I know I can." Hyoushin's lips twitched into a faint smile. "Take care, Maichu. I am running out of people I can trust."

"No problem." Maichu got to his feet. "I'll find out what we need to know. And I'll be back again. It takes more than one mountain bandit to kill me!"

With that he was gone, and Hyoushin sighed, sinking back in his seat as he finished his own drink. He set the glass down on the scarred wood, running his fingers through his thick silver hair.

"I am useless like this." He muttered, slipping into his own language almost unconsciously as he fumbled at his belt for a fresh tie with which to fasten back the thick, heavy locks. "Relying on Maichu so much is not good, but the weather here is taking its toll on me more than I'd like. Even so, I am fortunate to have him. I do not know what I would do without him, considering the fact that Kounan's weather has hit me so severely."

Carefully he bound his hair back from his face, somewhat relieved to feel the faint breeze of air from the inn door reach his neck. It was, he realised, cooler even inside the packed inn than it was in the direct glare of the southern sun.

"Nice as it would be to remain here indefinitely, this is not a pleasure trip." He told himself ruefully. "I should leave also, and see

what I can find in this city."

As he prepared to get to his feet, the sound of voices made him pause, as he heard the young girl who had been flirting with the bandit re-enter the tavern.

"You idiot, Maiki! You know Genrou-sama's too old an' too good for the likes of you!" One of her fellow serving girls hissed, and out of the corner of his eye Hyoushin saw Maiki adopt a defensive stance.

"I can't help it." She protested. "Genrou-sama's a proper man. Not like some of the idiots who come in here an' try groping us. He can hold his ale, an' he's handsome, too. What's wrong with tryin' my luck? You only live once, after all."

"Yes, but shit, Maiki, ain't aimin' for the friggin' Kashira of Reikaku-zan a bit out of your tree?" The second girl said scathingly. "The guy pretty much rules Souun — or hadn't you noticed a little thing like that? You ain't nothin' in comparison — jus' another tavern girl an' that's all. Besides the fact he is twice as old as you or near enough — an' married, too. You're nuts in the head if you think you stand a chance gettin' his attention — everyone knows that Anzu-sama's one o' the prettiest women in the area even now, an' a crack swordswoman t'boot. You really want to risk pissin' her off with your games?"

"Kashira of… Reikaku-zan?" Hyoushin's eyes widened as he digested this, and inwardly he cursed his own incompetence. "And I have sent Maichu after him. That was foolish, Hyoushin."

For a moment he debated hurrying after his young companion with the intention of recalling him, then he hesitated, realising the folly of his thoughts.

"To go after the boy now would only be to attract attention to him." He realised. "And I could well put him into danger since he is able to blend among the ordinary folk and I am not. He is a skilled enough soldier, surely, simply to observe without generating too much suspicion… and he is much like everyone else in appearance and apparel. I must think more clearly — this wretched heat is making a mockery of my judgement."

He rubbed his temples, as the pieces fell into place and he realised what about the man had been so familiar.

"The Kashira of Reikaku-zan is Tasuki of Suzaku." He muttered. "And that young girl — the one possessed by Doryoku — she was his daughter. The resemblance is clear — why did I not make that

connection before?"

"Guys our age are so immature." Maiki was speaking again, and Hyoushin forced his remonstrations aside as he once more focused on the girls' hushed conversation. They were, he realised, only just within his earshot, and that their words probably did not carry into the main body of the tavern, but they had overlooked his presence in the corner, and Hyoushin knew it was because he had pretended not to understand Chinese.

"So they talk freely, and I will listen." He decided grimly. "At least that way I will learn, I hope, what kind of man I have sent Maichu after."

"Not all of them are." The other girl objected. "You're just too picky. That's all."

"No, they all are." Maiki groaned. "They suck. And they act like idiots after just a few glasses of ale. What kind of a man flops all over you on the least excuse?"

"I don't know." The other girl seemed to be considering this. "There was that one young guy — nice-spoken an' pretty t'look at too. He was handsome enough, an' friendly, too, without resortin' to gropin'. I can't imagine he'd be the kind to flop all over. He was well-dressed an' cultured, like."

"Okay, I suppose, but that was one occasion, once." Maiki folded her arms. "People pass through. He was from the East — y'could tell soon as he spoke, no matter how cultured he was. He's probably long gone back to Kutou by now."

"That's where you're wrong, Mai-chan." Her companion said lightly. "Because he's been here more than once. He's stoppin' in one of the villages— the Eastern Village, I think. He's a friend of Suzaku's Chichiri-sama, because I've seen him here in Souun with people from there. He's obviously not going to be a loser, is he? You jus' need to open your eyes more."

"A well-cultured, finely spoken young stranger from the East…" Hyoushin pursed his lips. "So this is the area that Aoiketsu has settled on, then. It must be him… which means our instincts in coming this way were correct."

Carefully he shifted in his seat so he could see the two more clearly, half-wishing he could ask them questions but knowing that if he did, they would close right up and he would lose any chance of discovering more.

“I am an oddity to look at and that can be a benefit or a hindrance, depending on the situation.” He realised, frustration in his amethyst eyes. “If I go after Maichu, I will bring attention on him. And if I stay here, I may learn more. But it would have been useful to have had him interrogate these girls — he has the adequate charms to so do, after all.”

“From the village, huh?” Oblivious to the Meihi’s attention, Maiki seemed to be thinking this over. “Still, he’s not as cool as Genrou-sama. Genrou-sama’s a bandit, and that’s exciting — he’s a swordsman and a warrior for Suzaku. You can’t beat that… like I said, he’s a real man. Not just some pretty-boy from one of the villages. Friend of Suzaku or not, I’m only interested in Genrou-sama.”

“Then you’ll be lonely a long while, idiot.” Her friend said disparagingly. “Because he ain’t going to bite.”

“I like a challenge.” Maiki shrugged. “An’ you can talk, since you don’t get hardly any men payin’ you attention, either.”

“I ain’t as desperate a specimen as you.” Was the girl’s scathing response. Her gaze drifted across the room, resting momentarily on Hyoushin, and the Meihi stared back at her, assuming a blank, half-focused look as he hoped his observation of them hadn’t been noticed.

“Hey, that one’s a weird’un.” At length the girl spoke, and Hyoushin resisted the impulse to react as he realised he was now the focus of their conversation. “Did you see him come in? Spoke in some weird language an’ look how he’s dressed. Talk about a foreigner to these parts — wonder what the hell he’s doin’ in Souun?”

“You’d think there’s be better places to come all this way to visit.” Maiki admitted. “I don’t know, though. He’s weird lookin’, sure, but in a good way. He’s not as handsome as Genrou-sama, but you know, he’s interestin’. I’d call him attractive — exotic. His eyes are just like amethysts… I never saw anyone like that before.”

“You’re a hopeless case.” Her friend sighed, shaking her head. “What’s the point in snagging a guy who don’t even speak your language?”

“It might be a good thing.” Maiki replied carelessly. “Then I wouldn’t have to listen to him boast.”

At that point the innkeeper’s call interrupted their conversation, and the girls dispersed to carry out individual errands, their interest in their strange visitor forgotten in light of the steady stream of customers waiting to be served. Hyoushin sighed, inwardly relieved to

no longer be the subject of their scrutiny.

“If they had known I understood every word, they would have been more circumspect.” He reflected ruefully. “I am not sure I like being so examined. But still, I have learnt something from their conversation. They have seen Aoiketsu — and if I am clever, I may yet discover which path leads to the Eastern Village. If he remains in the company of Suzaku’s Chichiri, then what I most need to do is locate his whereabouts. Without Maichu, I am unable to risk revealing myself by asking questions… but at least, for the time being, I have something to go on. And that, for now will suffice. I will take a room here as a base and see what I can discover today — tonight, when the sun sets, I will be better able to investigate. And tomorrow I will reconvene with Maichu — with luck one of us may well have found Aoiketsu by that time!”

So, they would be going to Kutou.

As Aoiketsu leant up against the tall tree that spread its leaves over the Ri farmstead, he chewed down on his lip, observing the two figures that, not far away were completely engrossed in their own affairs. Since the sun had risen that morning, Hikari had tackled Chichiri about the honing of her magic, and, having heard her out, Chichiri had agreed that it was time once more to work on the girl’s inner power. Consequently, and even despite the scorching Kounan sun, the two had been working hard almost all of the day, and as Aoiketsu watched them, he felt a faint sense of wistfulness stir up inside of him.

“This is the thing that Hikari can do that makes her different from me and anyone else in this world.” He murmured, as he made himself more comfortable against the broad, dark-wood trunk. “But in the end, if she succeeds… then it’ll be time to lose her completely. And even though I say I can deal with it — can I really?”

His mind flitted back to the kiss on Koku-zan’s snowy slopes, and despite himself he sighed.

“Soldiers live day by day. They don’t think of what the future holds.” He reasoned. “But I don’t think that I’ve been thinking at all like a soldier of late. I’ve allowed a girl to get in the way of my duty… and even though it’s complicated, I’ve no intention of changing that decision. Hikari’s had an effect on me and I can’t explain it — while she’s here, and I’m with her, I’m happy and everything is fine. But it’s not fine. Kutou’s still in pain. If Hikari succeeds, she’ll still have to go home. If she fails, we all die. There’s no happy ending. But even so, I

can't walk away."

"It's no good, Chichiri." At that moment, Hikari's voice broke through his thoughts and Aoiketsu glanced up, taking in the expression on the schoolgirl's face. "It doesn't matter how much I try, I can't wake Suzaku on my own. When I'm in trouble, he comes to help me — but I don't want to be in mortal danger before I learn how to control this thing. If I'm going to try and raise him…"

"It's not an easy business, raising a God." Chichiri came to rest a hand on her shoulder, sending her a lop-sided grin. "You're not doing as badly as you think you are, Hikari-chan. When you first came here you had no connection to your Shinzahou side at all. You didn't even want to *acknowledge* that connection. Now you're actively looking for Suzaku. And you might not feel it yourself, but I do — that flicker of the phoenix's spirit has grown more vivid in your aura. You are stronger — you just haven't had cause to prove it yet."

"You really think so?" Hikari looked doubtful, reaching up to loosen her thick hair from its braid as she ran her fingers through it. "I guess I've made up my mind completely about doing this and saving Kutou and Kounan and everyone, so I'm trying my hardest to be strong. But I still don't understand a lot about it… or about being any kind of a Miko. So… maybe that's part of it. That I don't really know what I'm trying to do."

"Can that woman help?" Aoiketsu took a hand at that moment, and the two — sorcerer and student — glanced up as one person, Hikari shooting him a startled look as if she had seen him for the first time.

"Aoi-kun?" She murmured. "Were you watching us?"

"Not much else for me to do." Aoiketsu looked sheepish. "Sorry… wasn't I supposed to?"

"I guess it doesn't matter." Hikari shrugged. "There wasn't much to see, anyway."

"What woman do you mean, Aoi?" Chichiri eyed him keenly. "Who do you think might be able to help us?"

"That Taiitsukun dame you and Myoume were talking about last night… when we were with the Emperor." Aoiketsu replied. "Isn't she all powerful or something — isn't there any way she can help?"

"Taiitsukun…" Chichiri frowned. Slowly he shook his head.

"She's being as obtuse as ever about all of this." He said sadly. "No, Aoi, I don't think so. Or she's not willing to, perhaps that's more like

it. I did go see her, before you returned to Kounan. But she maintains that Hikari isn't able to raise Suzaku using the power within her. And that's that. She's charged us with saving this world, but even so…"

"She's not giving us any pointers." Hikari sighed, sinking down beneath the tree as she leant up against it. "I'm hot and tired, and frustrated, too. It's harder than it looks, using magic. You make it look so easy, Chichiri… but it really isn't."

"Well, I trained hard to use my power when I first understood what it was I had." Chichiri told her. "I've had a lot of years to hone my skills. And besides, my gifts were Suzaku-given, true, but yours are fragments of Suzaku's own self. His power lives within you — that's different. Even I don't know entirely how to raise that. I've dealt with Shinzahou before, and even used them in some respect or other. But you're not a thing, Hikari-chan. You're a person. And that makes it very difficult indeed."

He offered her a smile.

"I wouldn't want you to be hurt." He added. "Tamahome would never forgive me, if I let anything bad happen to you."

"Dad, huh." Hikari became pensive, and she shrugged. "I guess they're probably pretty worried, back home. But I think Mother understood why I had to do this. And I want to see it through. So in that case, I have to push myself, don't I? Even if I'm scared or it hurts — I have to."

"Have you finished for the afternoon?"

Before anyone else could respond, Aidou came across the grass, wiping her hands dry on her apron as she cast them a quizzical glance. "It's getting later, even though the sun is still out — I'm beginning to prepare dinner and I'd like to know if everyone's going to be attending."

"We're done for today, Aidou-chan." Chichiri assured her. "I think Hikari's about reached her limit for one afternoon."

"Good." Aidou smiled. "In that case, Hikari-chan, I'd like to borrow you for a while."

"Borrow me?" Hikari looked startled. "In what way?"

"I've sent Eiju to fetch firewood and Meikyo's hauling water." Aidou told her. "But I need someone to put out the plates and help me prepare things. Mei-chan's eager but the plates are heavy and stored up high — I worry about her dropping one on herself. Besides, an

extra pair of hands is always useful when cooking, and even with Meikyo's help there are several mouths to feed. Will you come and put my mind at rest?"

"Oh." Hikari smiled, scrambling to her feet. "Sure. I guess that'd be okay. And I'm hungry, so if I help out that'll mean we eat sooner too, right?"

"You really are Miaka's daughter, when you say things like that." Chichiri reflected, amused, and Hikari blushed.

"People do say that." She admitted. "I guess I'm going to find out soon enough just how much like her I really am, aren't I?"

She offered Aidou a sheepish grin.

"You know, at home, I always hated setting out the table or helping in the kitchen." She added. "I'm not a very good cook, no matter how much I like to eat, and it was always too much bother. I guess I just left it all to Mother, most of the time… I didn't even really think about helping her out."

"It's a daughter's responsibility to help her mother." Aidou chided gently. "I helped mine and Meikyo helps me. You should do the same for Miaka-sama, Hikari-chan. Even in your world things can't be so different as that."

"I don't know." Hikari admitted. "In this world, even *I'm* different, so it's hard to tell. I'm realising a lot of things I never realised before, since I've been here. I'll come help, Aidou-san. Maybe if I do that, when I go home I'll know a little more about what goes on in the kitchen."

"Shall I come help out too?" Aoiketsu asked. "Myoume's still scouring the area for any sign of danger, but…"

"Do you cook, then?" Aidou asked him doubtfully, and Aoiketsu shook his head.

"No, but…"

"Then you can help by staying well away from the kitchen." Aidou said pragmatically. "We'll do quite well, thank you, without any clumsy hands at the stove."

Hikari stifled a smile, as Aoiketsu sent Aidou an uncertain look.

"In any case, Aoi-kun, I want a chance to speak to you myself." Chichiri's good eye glittered with amusement at his wife's words. "So you come with me, and let Hikari go help Aidou to prepare dinner.

It'll be better all round that way, you know."

"All… all right." Aoiketsu recovered himself, nodding his head. "I'll do that."

"Then it's settled." Aidou looked approving. "Fine. Come on, Hikari. Dinner won't cook itself."

"I'm coming." Hikari nodded, and as the two of them headed back to the house, Aoiketsu stared after them, confused.

At his expression, Chichiri chuckled.

"Aidou has a way of making herself understood." He said mildly. "Don't take it personally, Aoi-kun. She has the strong belief that men are useless if let near the kitchen — and she probably has good reason to think so. Although I'm adept at preparing food in the wilderness, I confess I'm not so good at doing so within the safety of my own home. Her opinion of male domestic skills was low before — but I'm afraid I've coloured it permanently with my cooking incompetence."

He shrugged.

"Besides, she's always been a believer in the traditional family roles." He added. "That was the way she was raised, after all. She takes a lot of pride in her cooking, and she's very good at it. I find it's better not to try and change her mind, when it comes to that. Good nutrition is an important thing, you know."

"She's not really the kind of woman that I'd want to argue with." Aoiketsu admitted. "You and she are so completely different, Chichiri — how do you handle that?"

"Ah. Well. We have more in common than you might think." Chichiri said reflectively. "My wife is a very resolute woman, Aoi, but she also has a very kind heart. And having her has been both my strength and my comfort many times over the past years we've been together. You may learn that, one day, when it's your turn to settle down."

Aoiketsu's expression became grave.

"Maybe." He hazarded. "If I ever do."

"Is that the soldier speaking, Aoi? Or something else?" Chichiri eyed him in interest, and Aoiketsu shrugged his shoulders.

"It's difficult to say." He owned.

For a moment there was a pause, then,

“You’ve not spoken to me any differently since we came back. It’s like nothing has changed, even though everything has.” He murmured. “And you knew, didn’t you? Before we left — that I’d come here with an ulterior motive.”

“Yes.” Chichiri agreed cheerfully. “But I followed Myoume’s counsel and trusted in you. And she was right, I think. I don’t doubt your intentions to help, Aoi.”

“You’re not angry with me for trying to deceive you?”

“I’m a sorcerer, Aoi. I’ve spent a long time perfecting the art of both illusion and disguise.” Chichiri looked amused. “It would be hypocritical to criticise someone for deception, now wouldn’t it?”

“But even if that’s true, you’re an honest person.” Aoiketsu glanced at his hands, toying idly with the ring on his finger as he considered what he wanted to say. “And I took advantage of your kindness to try and find out things about your family. I… I didn’t know that Miramu had hurt Meikyo, though. I… I am sorry for that. It wasn’t…”

“It wasn’t anything to do with you. And nor was Jin’s death.” Chichiri said quietly, shaking his head. “Don’t apologise for things that aren’t your fault, you know? I’ll accept an apology only for the deception you tried to play — not for anything else. After all, even that deception had good intentions, didn’t it? Your aim was to help Kutou, not hurt Kounan.”

“It still is.” Aoiketsu admitted. “More than anything, that’s what I want.”

He sighed.

“When I was younger, and we were still training and stuff, I had this naïve idea of becoming some strong soldier to save Kutou and then, when it was over, there’d be a peaceful world for us all to live in.” He said slowly. “And in this world I’d find someone, settle down and have a family. I’d take the exams and become an official and do all those things that I was trained and educated to do. But…”

“But…?”

“Whatever we’re going to do, I may still come out dead the other side — or at the very least still looking like Kutou’s traitor.” Aoiketsu said gravely. “And more, Chichiri… I didn’t realise that there’d be a Hikari in all of this. That makes it… complicated to say the least.”

“Ah. Hikari.” Chichiri smiled. “The exact reason I wanted to speak to you. Although I think it’s possibly too late. Still… as her self-

appointed guardian, I think you need to know that Hikari's time here is only limited. She will go home. And if you fall in love with her, Aoi-kun — you'll only come to suffer for it in the long run. Both of you will."

"It is too late." Aoiketsu responded quietly. "I'm already too far past that line. I… I think she is too. It's like fighting fate, trying to swim against it. Myoume told us we had a connection, and we do. But I think it's become more than that. Even so…"

"Even so, you understand what it'll mean?"

"Yes." Aoiketsu nodded. "I know that Hikari's only here to help save this world. And that even if we win — even if we succeed — she has another home to go to where I can't reach."

"She does." Chichiri agreed. "An alien world to this one. I've seen it, briefly, and I won't pretend I understand it. Tamahome sacrificed everything and suffered much to go there. But his was a special case. You… may not find it so easy, even if you did make up your mind to follow her."

"I wouldn't even know how to." Aoiketsu grimaced. "But you've been to her world? How… is that possible?"

"To follow the Miko and raise Suzaku, a lot of things were possible." Chichiri said evenly. "Tasuki and I both followed Miaka and Tamahome to her world. In order to save our world and hers from a dangerous threat… that was what we were called upon to do."

"A dangerous threat." Something in Chichiri's words made Aoiketsu frown, and he eyed the sorcerer keenly.

"You mean Nakago, don't you?" He murmured. "My father. Kutou's Shougun Gi Ayuru."

"Yes." Chichiri agreed. "So you *are* aware of that connection. I did wonder whether or not you were."

"I've come to be." Aoiketsu admitted. "And that he hurt Kounan's people a lot during the war. I feel bad about that… if there's something…"

"I already told you not to worry about things you didn't do." Chichiri chided, shaking his head. "No, Aoi. Your father's actions are not yours… you owe no apology for them."

He took a step away from the tree, gesturing for his companion to follow him and non-plussed Aoiketsu did so, as the two men left the relative security of the Ri land and stepped out into the village. The

streets were busy, despite the fact it was beginning to grow late, and as they reached the central pathway through the cluster of houses, Chichiri held up his hand to indicate for his companion to stop.

“Watch for a moment.” He said softly. “And tell me what you see.”

Aoiketsu frowned, glancing around him as he wondered what the enigmatic sorcerer meant.

“The Eastern Village.” He said at length. “With Reikaku-zan in the background, and…”

“No. Not that.” Chichiri shook his head. “Within the village itself. Look and tell me… what do you see?”

Aoiketsu turned back to the scene that surrounded them, creasing his brow as he struggled to understand what he was supposed to be looking for. Across the way, two young boys struggled with a heavy cart-load of wool skeins, their merry banter telling him that it was almost time for their work to finish and their playtime to begin. At the house next door, a pretty young woman of about nineteen was cleaning the front step of her simple, ramshackle home, a small girl of no more than two years old clinging to her skirts as she went about her chores. At the opposite end of the mud track, a middle-aged man, balding and round about the middle from ale was teasing another man about half his age about his prowess with a local woman, and beneath a tree, watching everything with a serene sense of peace was an elderly man in his middle seventies, twisting his white beard absently in his fingers as he reflected on his juniors.

“I just see people in the village.” Aoiketsu said eventually. “I’m sorry, Chichiri. I don’t know what I’m supposed to see.”

“Just what you have seen.” Chichiri smiled, humour dancing in his ruby gaze. “People. Happy, safe, secure people living their every day lives. That’s what I wanted you to see.”

“But I don’t…”

“Sixteen years ago this village was burnt to the ground.” Chichiri continued. “The people who lived here largely fled, and most did not come back. Aidou was the only one who chose to stay here — to begin to rebuild the village and start afresh. I admired her for that, and offered her my help. In time, it became more our project than simply hers. And I realised that resolution is part of life — one of the strengths that people have, if they only come to look for it.”

He gestured towards the flower-flanked street.

“This place was devastated, yet someone believed in it enough to bring it back to life.” He said softly. “Now it’s a thriving settlement again, with close ties to Souun and Reikaku-zan… and consequently very few troubles. The people here are happy and safe — you can see that for yourself. Now do you understand? Nakago destroyed a lot of things… within Kounan and within Kutou. But you’re here to help rebuild them. You have that faith in your country, Aoi-kun — that love of Kutou that makes you want to see it happy and at peace. That was the faith Aidou had, when she decided to stay here. You shouldn’t worry about the things your father did or didn’t manage to do. Your concern is what *you* can do — that’s powerful in itself, you know.”

“Powerful…” Aoiketsu murmured, looking on the village with new eyes. “You can’t tell that anything like that happened here.”

“Many villages in Kounan suffered through the war — although this wasn’t one of them.” Chichiri agreed. “But human beings have an ability to recover, you know. They’re stronger than they seem, sometimes. I learnt that from my own experience.”

“But Hikari and Myoume have both seen this world destroyed, haven’t they?” Aoiketsu turned to his companion, and Chichiri became grave, nodding his head.

“They have, but I won’t accept that and I don’t think you will, either.” He said evenly. “It’s not something we’re going to let happen without a fight, after all. That’s why Hikari’s here. Why all of us are here. Even if the exact path isn’t clear yet — there must be something that we can do. All of us. It doesn’t matter where we’re from or who we’re representing. It’s about the future of all the people here. Not just in Kounan or Kutou — not any more. This is about everything. And the Gods want us to work together.”

Aoiketsu was silent for a moment, taking this all in. Then he nodded.

“I told Reizeitei-sama I’d act in Kounan’s name to repay my father’s blood debt to him.” He said quietly. “But it’s not just about that to me. Myoume’s said this too — about borders not being important. Saving Kutou is about protecting Kounan, too. And vice versa. It’s all linked together. And if we try and separate everything into sides, we’ll just mess up and fail, won’t we?”

“I thought you were a wise young man when I first met you.” Chichiri reflected. “Now I know you are… and I’m glad to see it.”

He smiled.

“Reizeitei-sama wasn’t too harsh on you, I hope?”

“He did point a sword at me.” Aoiketsu admitted. “But I think that I can forgive him that. I think we wound up coming to terms, Chichiri. I… he’s not that different from me in some ways. He said it himself — that the war robbed us both of our fathers. And mine did kill his, but Hikari’s killed mine. Yet we’re all on the same side now — what do you suppose they’d think of that?”

“Hotohori-sama would accept it if it was to Kounan’s good.” Chichiri said decidedly. “I know that without even stopping to think about it. He was a truly strong Emperor, Aoi. And his son is much in his mould.”

“I wonder if I’m in *my* father’s mould.” Aoiketsu admitted. “Chichiri, something’s been bothering me. Since I discovered I was Nakago’s son… Myoume said something else, when we were travelling. About my squeamishness, and that it’s shielded me from my… my killer instinct. That… maybe… some part of him is in me, after all.”

“Undoubtedly, you know. He was your father.” Chichiri said frankly. Then he smiled. “Don’t look so dismayed. That isn’t a bad thing.”

“But Nakago… wasn’t he your… enemy?”

“Very definitely.” Chichiri agreed gravely. “But in some ways perhaps he was more his own enemy than ours. His motives were twisted, after all… but it wasn’t entirely his own fault that he ended up that way.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I suppose noone has ever spoken to you about that final battle in Hikari’s world, have they?” Chichiri reflected. “Well, then I will — and maybe then you’ll understand a little bit more about the man who sired you.”

“All right.” Aoiketsu agreed, as they walked down the central street and towards the village limits. Trees flanked the outside of the Eastern Village, through the centre of which a glittering stream wound its way from the mountains down towards the river that fed Souun, and even though the day was hot, here with the protection of the branches overhead there was a gentle, cool breeze.

“This is a good place to talk.” Chichiri explained, as Aoiketsu glanced at him. “Take a seat. Aidou will be cooking a while yet, and if she can’t find me, she’ll know where to send Eiju to look. I’m

predictable, you see — a creature of habit, you know."

"I can understand that." Aoiketsu did as he was bidden, sinking down on the soft grass as he gazed across at the village beyond. "It's a nice view, with the mountain behind, and cool and peaceful with the stream and the trees. Kounan is truly a beautiful country, Chichiri. I never realised it till I came here, but it is."

"Yes, it is." Chichiri agreed. "And so will Kutou be, one day — when peace is restored. After all, with its plentiful resources of water, it has the potential to be a strong, thriving state once again."

"I hope so." Aoiketsu admitted. "I guess time will tell."

Chichiri nodded, dropping gracefully down beside him as he crossed his legs, settling comfortably on the ground.

"I met your father several times, and matched my magic against his on occasion, too." He said pensively. "He was strong — stronger than the other Seiryuu were. Stronger than me, also — my sorcery is not feeble, but Nakago's abilities were something else and it was all I could do to shield against him. It was not easy to face him… in the end it took the combined strength of all of us to take him down. Tamahome was the vessel and he cast the final blow. But it was not only his strength that killed Nakago. It was the strength of all seven of us."

"All… of you?"

"That's right." Chichiri agreed. "In Miaka's world, with Seiryuu and Suzaku in the sky above our heads. We made them enemies, Aoi. Because of that fact, neither Kounan nor Kutou were granted peace through the wishes of the Miko. That came for us later… for Kutou it never did. That's why I'm so conscious this time that we're not drawing lines in the sand. This might be Kutou's last chance — and if Hikari and Myoume's visions are right, it could be everyone's last chance to properly finish the legend and bring peace to this world."

"I still can't believe you went to Hikari's world." Aoiketsu admitted. "I thought it was hard — that people from this world couldn't."

"We were Seishi answering the call of our Miko." Chichiri grinned. "It drew Nakago and Suboshi there, too. Both of them died in the Miko's world. Yui and Miaka both went back there too soon and dragged this world and that one into direct contact with one another. It was that which first allowed Tamahome to go there… though it was by no means the end of it. To cut a long story short, Nakago felt he could conquer even the Miko's world… and so he lost interest in the

fates of Kounan and Kutou."

"Lost interest in…" Aoiketsu's brows knitted together. "So he was evil after all, then? He did take off and abandon Kutou when they needed him most!"

"Nakago was a Hin." Chichiri said quietly. "A member of a tribal clan who worshipped a spirit called 'Tenkou'. Tenkou was an evil man who had cast himself as a deity in order to generate power in this world. In some respects, Nakago found himself pulled into the same trap… and I don't believe Tenkou was at all innocent in any of the things that followed. But, because they were different, and because of their contrary faith, the Hin were feared. Like other tribes in Kutou, they were persecuted and slaughtered under the regime of the Emperor Shoukitei. I realised that Nakago was one of them quite quickly. But I did not understand why he fought for his Emperor or for Seiryuu when he was born into that clan."

"Maybe it was like Hyoushin-sama. Maybe he was repaying someone who saved him." Aoiketsu suggested, but Chichiri shook his head.

"Nakago sought two things." He said quietly. "Revenge and death. That was all. Nothing else."

"Revenge and… death?"

"When Tamahome's fist pierced Nakago's chest, the force of it was strong enough for the two men to form a brief, sharp connection." Chichiri continued. "It may even have been Nakago's active doing — certainly he seemed more relieved than anything else that the fight was finally at an end. Through that connection, Tamahome saw the memories that had driven Nakago thus far. It painted a tragic picture… and made it clear that the true villain in all of this was not the Shougun but the man who had made him into the creature he became — Shoukitei, Emperor of Kutou."

"Shoukitei was a corrupt, greedy, twisted bastard." Aoiketsu agreed. "We all know that, even in Kutou. But even so…"

"Nakago saw his people slaughtered. He saw his mother raped, and it woke his power inside him to such a pitch that he destroyed not only the men attacking her but the woman herself." Chichiri said softly. "He was only a child, filled with this alien, frightening strength that had destroyed someone he loved and trusted and brought him into the power of an evil, corrupt man. You are a handsome young man, Aoi — so was your father, and for this reason he suffered terribly at Shoukitei's hands. That man's womanising was almost legendary —

but the fact that Shoukitei used young boys at his court as much as his women… may not have been so widely known."

"My father?" Aoiketsu's eyes widened with indignation and dismay. "When he was a *child*?"

"Shoukitei also made the boy witness the death of his friend in Kutou's custody." Chichiri agreed gravely. "In that life, death would have been his escape. But all the time there was that fear… accident or not, he had killed his mother. Accident or not, Aoi — he punished himself for that by forcing himself to keep living. And as time went on, and he became more and more isolated… so he became more and more fixated on revenge. His true aim against Kounan was never a hatred of our people. He as much told Hotohori-sama so when they fought that last time. It was a hatred of Kutou's regime — a desire to bring the Emperor to dust and destroy all the things that had made his existence a living hell. He was searching for a meaning to his own life — a reason to keep going, and keep fighting. In the end, maybe he was also looking for something — or someone — to destroy *him*, too."

Aoiketsu stared at the sorcerer in horror, a cold, icy grip encircling his heart as he digested his companion's words.

"All of that… is the truth?" He managed at length, and Chichiri nodded.

"All of it." He agreed. "Your father did evil things, but he was not born evil. And of course you have elements of him inside of you. The difference is simply this, Aoi. You have grown up with people who have taught you and helped you — you haven't been scarred the way he was. To have Nakago's spirit is not a bad thing. He was not a truly bad man. He was a truly tortured one, in the end. Death was his release. His freedom. That eventually, somehow, someone had ended the thing he could not end for himself."

"That almost sounds like Miramu." Aoiketsu realised. "He said that he keeps on living… keeps on doing things… because he isn't able to die. That same thing… is that why he said we were alike? Because inside of me is the blood of a man as twisted by circumstances as he is?"

"Possibly." Chichiri agreed. "It's hard to know for sure."

Aoiketsu sighed.

"And in light of that, given Nakago's apparent loyalty to Shoukitei, I guess I can understand a little bit why Myoume's so suspicious of Hyoushin-sama." He added. "But… no. I *know* him, Chichiri. He's not

the one. I swear."

"I believe the same as you." Chichiri smiled. "Whoever raised you to be this kind of soldier is not a man capable of such dark, treacherous acts. I'd stake my reputation as a sorcerer on that fact, too. Whatever he has suffered — he is not like Nakago, and he is not going to betray his Emperor. By your own testimony Kintsusei-sama rescued Hyoushin — he didn't abuse him. The relationship between your Emperor and your Commander is different to that between Shoukitei and his Shougun. No… I think you're right. We need to look elsewhere for our true foe."

"And you… don't think it could be me? Even though through my father I have Hin blood?"

"Aoi-kun, I know it isn't you." Chichiri rested a hand on his shoulder, shaking his head. "When I first saw you, it struck me that you had Nakago's eyes. But you didn't have the cold glitter in your expression that he often had in his. You can tell a lot by people's eyes, you know."

Aoiketsu looked sheepish.

"No kidding." He said ruefully. "One of my nurses when I was small used to call me *Aoime*. She thought it was some kind of omen, because it was so rare. I guess she was right… they were my legacy from Seiryuu after all."

"Yes." Chichiri said comfortably. "You and Hikari have had no choice in that, I'm afraid. She's Suzaku's and you're Seiryuu's. That's how the Gods have designed it to be, or so it seems."

"Even though Hikari was born in that world?"

"But Hikari was here before she was born." Chichiri said sensibly. "Miaka entrusted her to Suzaku before she even took her first breath — that's what makes her so unique and special. She's only truly the Shinzahou while she's here… her own world wouldn't support it. It's a very different place, Aoi-kun. A very different place indeed."

"I can't even picture it… the things she says about it are odd enough." Aoiketsu admitted.

"You know that the trip to Kutou won't be an easy one for you, if you go in Suzaku's company." Chichiri eyed him keenly, and Aoiketsu nodded his head.

"I'm prepared for that." He said firmly. "Even to be attacked if it comes to it. I'm a good fighter, Chichiri. I can defend myself and

Hikari both. Myoume said that so long as I'm with her she shouldn't come to harm. So I'm going to make sure that's the case."

"I suppose the question is how much are you willing to sacrifice for the benefit of Kutou?" Chichiri asked softly, and Aoiketsu hesitated for a moment. Then he spread his hands.

"I'm a soldier." He said evenly. "I'm trained to fight to defend my Emperor and my land, even to death. And that's what I'll do, if it's what it takes. Because that's what I've always been raised to do. To put Kutou first… before everything."

Chichiri smiled.

"Yes. You are Seiryuu's all right." He decided. "You're no Seishi, but you have the spirit of one all the same. And from what Hikari and Myoume have said, you're a strong fighter, too. I'm glad you feel like you do, because I'm fairly sure that I won't be facing battle in the East this time around. Tasuki and I… I think we'll have to stay here."

"We'll be okay, though." Aoiketsu said firmly, realising as he spoke that he meant every word. "Somehow, Chichiri — we *will* do this. I swear. Whatever it takes to save Kutou, we'll find a way. I know it. We will."

Chapter 5

Chapter Four

The afternoon was pushing on towards evening by the time Tasuki made his way casually back towards the mountain, whistling absently under his breath as he strode quickly and confidently along the uneven, rocky path. As he did so, he reflected on the wisdom of his decision — that some time away from the memory of Jin's death had been long overdue.

"It ain't like me to dwell on shit, kid." He murmured, his gaze darting to the sky as he took in the faint wisps of cloud. "But I'm done with it now. You were a damn fine bandit an' we'll honour you, not whine about it. That ain't my style. An' Shishi, too — I should know by now that she's got the nine lives of a huntin' cat as well as the name of one. Kouji was smarter than he knew when he said I was goin' soft on the job — well, not any more. I've plenty of other things t'be thinkin' of than fussin' over kids an' their antics. I'm king of this mountain an' it's about time I remembered it."

He thrust his hands into the pocket of his jacket, idly wondering as he did so whether or not the young man who had been tracking him around Souun was still on his tail. For Tasuki, as bandit Kashira, it was not uncommon for Kaou-zan spies or troublemakers to spot him out as a potential target, and despite his impulsive temper he had long since learnt that all out confrontations in the city centre did nothing except damage the property and scare the wits of the people who he and his comrades had sworn to protect.

"But if he's still on my track out in open country, that's a different matter." He mused. "The little idiot thinks I ain't noticed — he must be green indeed if he thinks a bandit don't have the smarts to figure there's someone actin' as his shadow. If it's Kaou-zan he's come from, I'll soon send him packin'. None of their sad excuses have had any luck against Reikaku-zan since I've been full time Kashira an' dammit, it ain't gonna begin now."

As he set foot on the steepish mountain path that led directly to the bandit's strong-hold, he cast a sidelong glance out of the corner of his eye, nodding slightly as he confirmed the young man was still trailing him.

"Though I gotta be fair to the kid." He reflected, as he kicked idly

at a pebble, watching it skim across the dusty ground. “He’s kept pace with me for most the afternoon, no matter where I’ve been or what I’ve been doin’. He’s persistant — or he wants somethin’ in particular. But he ain’t made a move… I wonder what he’s about. I only noticed him after I left the inn… but I guess he could’ve been behind me for longer and I jus’ didn’t register till then that he was there.”

He frowned, the tip of a fanged tooth protruding over his bottom lip as he contemplated the best move to make. On the one hand, he knew, he did not want to spill the blood of a youngster little older than Jin if he could help it. On the other hand, though, they were getting closer to Reikaku-zan’s base and the last thing he wanted was to allow a stranger to run deep into his territory.

“So I’ll have to stop him here, I guess.” He told himself regretfully. “There’s no helpin’ it — this is as far as he goes.”

He paused, turning around as his fingers brushed absently against the hilt of his sword. At first glance, he could see noone, but his sharp bandit senses soon picked up a faint shadow among the greenery and he pursed his lips, gesturing towards them with his free hand.

“You got a choice, kid.” He said frankly. “Come out where I can see you an’ we’ll talk about it… or I’ll go in for some tree cuttin’ and you might just end up the worst for it.”

There was a moment of silence, then a figure emerged from the trees, a defiant, resolute look on his young features. For a moment something in the boy’s expression reminded Tasuki of his lost son, and his eyes narrowed.

“Who are you?” He asked softly. “An’ why have you been followin’ me since Souun?”

“Following?” The youngster stared at him, but Tasuki could see through his attempted innocence. “I wasn’t following you. I’m a merchant travelling through these parts and I became lost — that’s all.”

“Very lost, if that’s the case.” Tasuki snorted. “These paths lead to the mountains, boy… don’t you understand what that means? In these parts, mountains mean bandits an’ bandits mean toll. Are you tellin’ me you’re so much of a fool as that?”

“Toll?” The young man looked bemused, and Tasuki sighed, shaking his head.

“I ain’t playin’ games with you.” He said quietly. “Who are you an’ what do you want in these parts? This is Reikaku-zan territory —

where are you from an' what is your game with me?"

"I don't know what you mean." The young man said evenly, and Tasuki saw the stranger's fingers twitch almost instinctively towards the glittering hilt of something at his belt. "I told you. I got lost. That's all."

"Nice try." He said frankly. "But you've been trackin' me all across Souun, so it seems your business is with me after all."

The intruder's eyes widened, and Tasuki nodded.

"Yes, you need to work on your tracking skills." He said softly. "It ain't so easy to trail a wolf, you know… or did noone ever tell you that?"

"A… wolf?" The young man hesitated, then he seemed to make up his mind, as with a sweep of his right hand he drew his sword. "I don't understand what you're talking about, but I'm ready to take you on if you're going to get in my way."

"Shit." Tasuki tut-tutted, shaking his head as he leant up against the trunk of a nearby tree. "You really are an idiot. Didn't anyone teach you to gauge your opponent's strength before declarin' war like that? Mind you, like as not I'd have done the same thing as your age. What are you, kid? Seventeen? Eighteen, maybe? Young enough to throw yourself in front of someone's blade an' hope for the best. That technique kills people, you know. You shouldn't challenge folk that you don't know shit about."

"I'm not that easy to take down." The young man was indignant now, his dark eyes glittering with annoyance. "I'm not a kid and I don't need to be talked down to. I told you, if you want to get in my way, I'll take you on. You've got a sword — why don't you draw it an' then we'll see who's the stronger fighter?"

"I ain't takin' on a stripling like you." Tasuki said disparagingly. "You may or you may not be a whiz-kid with that blade… I don't know. But you wouldn't stand a chance if I fought you. An' I don't like killin' youngsters, not even if they have been sent by Kaou-zan or somewhere to cause me grief. Go home, boy. Go back to where you came from an' leave Reikaku-zan be. That is, if you like livin' — because there's a lot of men who wouldn't be so forgivin' as I am, considerin' where you are an' what you're wavin' at me."

"I'm not afraid and I'm not going back." The young man stood his ground. "I have to find Reikaku-zan, or…"

He faltered, his eyes opening wide in dismay as he realised what he

had let slip, and Tasuki's eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"To find Reikaku-zan." He murmured. "I see. Maybe you an' I should be havin' a bit more of an in-depth chat about that then, do you think? After all, you don't look like one of Kaou-zan's usual flunkies. You got a bit more spark in you than most of those cowards do. But even so…"

Before he could finish his sentence, however, there was a loud yell from the trees above his head and Tasuki gazed upwards just in time to see his young daughter launch herself from one of the branches and into the pathway between the bandit Kashira and his would-be stalker. Her blade was drawn, a look of indignation on her face, and for a moment Tasuki stared at her, realising as he did so that he had had no idea his cub had even been in the trees at all.

"Normally I'd know a mile away that Shishi's about." He muttered, as he hurriedly gathered his wits. "But this time… it was like she appeared from nowhere. Shit — have her stalkin' skills improved that much? Maybe she really is growin' without my noticin'!"

"Who the hell are you?" Oblivious to her father's attention, Shishi's gaze was locked on the intruder, brandishing her weapon as she advanced on him. "An' why are you drawin' a sword on Reikaku-zan?"

"Geez, how many of you people are there?" The stranger demanded. "Dammit, do you go around hidin' in trees as a normal rule, or what?"

"Answer my question." Shishi said darkly. "I ain't kiddin'. I want to know who you are an' why you're wavin' a blade at the Kashira… you better have a good answer, else I might find myself slittin' your throat for you."

"The… Kashira?" Despite himself the youngster faltered, and Tasuki frowned.

"Shishi, what the hell are you doin' here?" He demanded. "Are you trackin' me too? I thought you were on the mountain — or don't you think I can handle my own problems without your help?"

"*You* won't fight him, because you don't want to kill him." Shishi said flatly. "But *I* can. And I will, if he's comin' to mess with us. I could use the practice, anyhow. Enough shit's happened on Reikaku-zan already, an' dammit, I'm not lettin' anything else happen to any of my family."

"I don't fight girls." The stranger said bluntly, and Shishi snorted.

“That’s unfortunate for you, then.” She said evenly. “Because I ain’t got a problem fightin’ with boys.”

Before Tasuki could react, she had raised her weapon, charging at the stranger who cursed, bringing his own blade up to parry the impetuous young bandit’s strike. Tasuki opened his mouth to order his daughter back, but as he did so, he caught sight of the glint of resolution in the girl’s bronze eyes, and he faltered, remembering what Kouji had said.

“She needs her own strength.” He murmured. “If I keep pullin’ her back — if I keep tryin’ to protect her — she’ll never find it. But shit, I wish she’d get a little common sense. She’d not forgive me, if I jumped in now an’ hauled her out. But at least I got that option, if things get hairy. I won’t interfere unless she’s in trouble — but dammit, I didn’t expect her to jump into a fight like this with a complete stranger. Does the little idiot really think she needs to protect me?”

At that moment, Shishi swung again, the clatter of metal on metal echoing across the landscape as the sun glittered off the silver blades. Again the stranger countered her, though Tasuki noticed that he seemed genuinely unwilling to attack her and he frowned.

“Not from Kaou-zan then.” He muttered. “*They* ain’t got any compulsion about fightin’ a woman.”

He eyed the young man critically.

“He fights with a particular style, too. Almost like he’s been trained.” He realised. “Not a bandit, an’ definitely not a merchant. But what, then? There’s somethin’ in his speech that rings familiar, but I can’t pin on why… who is this kid, an’ why is he so determined to get to Reikaku-zan?”

He folded his arms, his gaze flitting to his young daughter as he watched her feint and dodge the stranger’s weapon, and he chewed absently on his lip as he admitted to himself how much she had come on.

“Jin always said she was plenty good enough to hold her own, though there’s still room for improvement.” He acknowledged. “But that she’d got to be so decisive and so clever with her blade… I didn’t realise. I guess I shouldn’t worry about her quite so much. Even if she is a girl — she’s holding her own.”

As if to confirm his thoughts, at that moment Shishi gained the advantage, using the familiar rocky terrain as a weapon as she tackled the intruder from above, knocking his blade from his hand and

pinning him to the ground with a whoop of victory.

“He’s down.” She announced unnecessarily, turning to send her father a triumphant look as she shifted her position to squat firmly across his torso. “What do you want me to do with him, Kashira? He ain’t gettin’ up from here ’less I move, so he ain’t doing any more fighting.”

“So I see.” Tasuki moved closer to the young soldier, gazing down into the panicked yet still defiant dark eyes.

“Get the hell off me, you brat.” The stranger managed. “You tryin’ to suffocate me? What the hell kind of move was that, anyway?”

“I’m a bandit. I’m an opportunist.” Shishi told him firmly. “And if you couldn’t breathe you wouldn’t be whining, so don’t give me that. I know how to pin someone without killin’ them, you know — I didn’t start fightin’ battles yesterday.”

Her rival just looked mutinous, and from the resolve in his dark eyes Tasuki had the sudden impression that it wouldn’t be easy to pry secrets from this stranger.

He bent to pick up the man’s sword, glancing at it as he ran his finger over the blue and gold hilt. It was scratched and tarnished in places, and the insignia that marked it was dirty from being constantly in use, yet he clearly recognised the symbol, and he frowned, realising as he did so what the familiar note in the boy’s voice had been. His speech was not as clean or as correct as Aoiketsu’s, and his accent bore the faintest hint of a provincial dialect, as if he had grown up in rural country but adapted his speech pattern after time spent in Kutou’s bustling capital city. Even despite these things, however, the similarities in their intonation were striking, and Tasuki knew he was right.

The eyes of the gilt dragon glared up at him as if reproaching him for his deduction, and his lips thinned.

“Seiryuu.” He murmured.

At this, Shishi’s eyes widened, and she glanced at the hapless prisoner anew.

“Shit.” She breathed. “You’re from *Kutou*?”

The young man merely pursed his lips, and Tasuki sighed. With a deft flick of his wrist, he had reversed the sword so that the blade now pointed directly at the stranger’s throat. The boy flinched, then met his gaze stolidly, and Tasuki’s lip curled into a grudging smile of

respect.

“Your name, soldier.” He said softly, and the young interloper stared at him. Tasuki nodded.

“Soldiers taken prisoner give their name an’ little else.” He said quietly. “You’re Seiryuu’s so you’re from a regiment in Kutou. You don’t need to tell me that — your sword already did. You ain’t escapin’ from here and I’ve got your weapon so even if you did shift Shishi’s weight off you, you wouldn’t be able to fight. So you might as well submit to protocol. You’re Reikaku-zan’s prisoner, now. An’ we might just be bandits to you, but I’ve fought for my Emperor just as sure as you fight for yours.”

At this, the stranger’s expression changed, and he sighed.

“Shi.” He said quietly. “Shi Maichu.”

“Maichu?” Shishi started. “Is that what you said? *Maichu*?”

“Yes — are you deaf or something?” Maichu demanded. “Why are you staring at me like I have an extra head?”

“You know this guy, Shishi?” Tasuki frowned, and Shishi shrugged, shaking her head.

“Never met him before.” She said frankly. “But Myoume has. In Sairou. In the cave where she had the Shinzahou.”

Maichu visibly flinched at this, biting his lip, and Tasuki knew it was true.

“In which case, that mad woman will probably want to talk with him.” He reflected. “And I’m intrigued too, now. I think we should take him back to Reikaku-zan, Shishi. Get off of him, huh? Get him on his feet. We ain’t carryin’ him — he can walk.”

Shishi hesitated, and Maichu cast her a glare.

“What?” He demanded. “You heard him — get your weight off me!”

“You’re a real charmer, you know that.” Shishi said scathingly. “How the hell you and he are buddies I don’t know — you’ve got the greeting manners of a raging mountain bear.”

“What the hell do you mean?” As she hauled him roughly to his feet, Maichu wheeled on her, fixing her with an odd look. “How am I whose buddy? What the hell do you think you know about me? We’ve never even met.”

Tasuki's brow furrowed at this.

"Aoiketsu." He muttered, and Shishi nodded her head.

"This is Aoi's playmate. The dancing spider." She said derisively, and Tasuki saw the colour drain from Maichu's features a second time. "Which means it ain't no accident he's here, Kashira. He's here on some errand. He was one of the ones sent here to spy on us — like Aoi was. An' I bet he's comin' to Reikaku-zan because of Hisei — because of the relic."

It was impossible for Maichu to look any more aghast, and despite himself, Tasuki grinned.

"You need to work on that poker face of yours, kid." He said frankly. "That makes it interestin'. Is that your errand, then? You think you can find your way into the heart of my mountain an' raid Reikaku-zan for Hisei's relic?"

"I don't have to tell you anything." Maichu said obstinately. "You can kill me if you want to — I still won't talk."

"Be damn difficult to make you talk if we killed you, idiot." Shishi said disparagingly. "Besides, if we'd wanted to do that, we would've. Or don't you know who you're dealin' with, huh? We ain't your average bandit pack. An' Kashira ain't someone you want to mess with. You're lucky he doesn't want to fight with you — there'd be nothing left by now if you did."

Maichu eyed her for a moment, then his gaze shifted to Tasuki, who shrugged his shoulders.

"The cub's not wrong." He said softly, reaching down to roll back the heavy sleeve of his jacket. "Or did noone tell you that Reikaku-zan's Genrou has another name?"

"Tasuki." At the sight of the glittering red character against the bandit's skin, Maichu's fight seemed to go out of him and he sighed, rubbing his temples.

"I… came to find Aoi." He said quietly. "An' yes, I came to find the mountain too — but… it's Aoi I'm really here to find. That's all. Because he's my buddy an' shit's happenin' back home. But I can't tell you about that, even if you torture me or kill me or whatever you do. I can only talk to him about it. Because it's to do with Kutou an'…an' that's all there is to it."

"I don't think he's smart enough to lie about that." Shishi reflected, eying Maichu thoughtfully.

“I ain’t lying!” Maichu protested. “What’d be the point? He’s got my weapon an’ his own — an’ he’s some kind of flame-throwin’ demon t’boot, if all of our information is right! That’s how it is an’ that’s all I can say! If you know who Aoi is… if you know…”

“We know.” Tasuki said quietly. “An’ I won’t pretend I’m happy that Chichiri’s taken to shelterin’ an Eastern spy. But the Emperor seems to have accepted it, so that’s good enough for me. Young Aoi seems keen to fight for this world, in any case. What about you, Shi Maichu? What’s your motivation?”

“I came to find Aoi. That’s all I can say till I’ve seen him — and I know that he’s okay.” Maichu folded his arms across his chest. “If you’ve found out who he is, then you might’ve hurt him. And maybe he’s a squeamish idiot sometimes, but he’s still my friend and that’s how I feel about it. Till I see Aoi, I’m not saying another word.”

Tasuki’s expression became grave and he crossed the grass towards them, resting a heavy, battle-scarred hand on the young man’s shoulder.

“You have a good sense of loyalty, kid.” He admitted. “But listen to me, an’ listen good. I’m a bandit, yes. I ain’t a killer. I’m Suzaku’s Tasuki, but I ain’t usin’ that power to settle my own grievances. Aoiketsu’s come here an’ he’s done things I ain’t happy about — true enough. I won’t lie about that to you. An’ I’ve fought Kutou enough in the past to be suspicious of your people when you come visitin’ my mountain. But Aoi’s barely older than a kid. Just like you are. An’ my son was the same, too. The only man I want to see dead is the one who took his life. That wasn’t you. An’ I don’t create unnecessary corpses.”

“Your son?” Maichu eyed him in confusion, then, “Shit… the bandit who was killed really was…?”

“My brother.” Shishi said flatly. “Kashira’s son. In as much as he could be, without it being by blood. Yes.”

“Shit.” Maichu fell silent for a moment, and Tasuki eyed him quizzically.

“What’s that look mean?” He demanded, and Maichu frowned.

“I was just cursin’ that bastard Miramu.” He said honestly, and something in his open, frank demeanour took Tasuki off his guard. “For puttin’ us in this position.”

“You won’t meet anyone who disagrees on this mountain.” Shishi said softly. “There ain’t no need to swallow the thought on our

account."

"Well…" Maichu hesitated, then he shrugged, offering her a rueful smile.

"That kind of cursin' ain't the kind of cursin' that should be done in front of a girl." He admitted sheepishly. "Even one who fights like a friggin' soldier… my Commander wouldn't settle for it an' my Ma'd've given me a black eye if she'd heard me try it."

Shishi's expression became dumbstruck at this, and despite himself Tasuki laughed.

"That's something that doesn't happen often." He said evenly. "Shishi lost for words."

"Shut up." Shishi glared at him, her cheeks red. "He said something stupid, that's all."

"What are you going to do to me?" Maichu asked hesitantly. "If you know about Aoi… and me… what…?"

"You're a prisoner of Reikaku-zan. I told you." Tasuki said frankly. "You might or might not be here on an errand to find your friend, kid — I don't know, yet. But I want to know more before I let you run riot around the south. It's gettin' hard to call the players in this game, or know what side they're fightin' for. So you're comin' back with us. I'm far more outta the loop than I'd like, an' it stops here."

"Do you want me to tie him, Kashira?" Shishi asked, and Tasuki eyed Maichu contemplatively.

"That's his call." He said evenly. "He can come of his own accord, an' we won't bother with restrainin' him. But there's nowhere to run on the mountain path, an' if he tries to escape, then I'll have to pull out the tessen. That's the way it is… it's up to you, soldier. Come without resistance or risk bein' flamed."

"I guess it's not much of a choice, put like that." Maichu admitted. "I'll come with you. But I won't tell you anything until I've seen Aoi's alive and all right — okay? Whether you believe me or not, that is the main reason I'm in Kounan. I want to find him."

"Aoi ain't dead." Shishi said frankly. "So that shouldn't be hard to prove. Get moving, huh? You heard the Kashira. You're Reikaku-zan's prisoner… an' you better keep it in mind not to piss anyone off on the mountain. If they find out you know the guy who killed Jin — you might find it ain't Kashira who's comin' at you with a sword!"

So the Meihi was alone.

Miramu clambered more securely between the rafters of the inn, perching from beam to beam as he settled himself more comfortably in an alcove beneath the attic window. Below him, oblivious to his attention, the ghost-pale tribesman was gathering together his belongings, and Miramu felt sure that soon he'd be making a move. Since his arrival in Souun earlier that day he had observed the other man as he had rented out a room in the busy city inn, and then withdrawn there, seemingly to wait out the day. Not that his wait had been a peaceful one, as Miramu had seen the man pacing across the floor and gazing out of the window to the streets below on more than one occasion. And yet, as the hours had passed, the assassin had realised that his first assumption that Hyoushin was waiting to meet someone was unfounded. Noone had disturbed him during the hours of the afternoon, and eventually the soldier had settled against the wall to write on scraps of folded parchment — clearly plotting something out but in characters that Miramu had never seen before in his life. Those scraps had since been shredded and discarded, but even if he had chosen to steal them, Miramu knew he would not make sense of the Meihi's thought processes.

And yet, despite the solitude, Miramu felt certain that the man had not always been travelling on his own. Hyoushin's distinctive left-handed blade stood propped against the door-frame, and it had not taken the assassin long to realise that Kikei's suspicions had been correct — that Maichu had most likely taken the blade and reunited it in secret with its owner.

"He looks somewhat haggard, though." He decided, stretching out across the wood much like a cat on a windowsill as he rested his chin in his hands. "And he doesn't even know that I've come to pay him a visit. Finding him was really a boringly easy task, in the end. The Meihi don't exist in Kounan, after all — it wasn't difficult to elicit information about a pale-skinned foreigner travelling in these parts. Even if he has somewhat changed his mode of dress — I guess even he's smart enough a man to realise wearing Imperial armour might jeopardise his chances of staying undercover."

It had been an easy journey south, since from his earlier visits he had become familiar with the terrain, and he had not been surprised to discover that his assumptions of the Meihi's destination had been correct.

"In search of Aoiketsu." He reflected, tapping his fingers idly against the blotch-painted wood as he did so. "I could tell you exactly

where your little protégé was, Hyoushin. He's across the valley in the village that hides Suzaku's Chichiri — I'd lay money on that, if I had any to play with. Right in the same vicinity as my wretched sister — which makes things complicated. I wonder if she's found me out, yet. She might have done. While I'm in Souun, I might yet hide from her — but I need to be careful. I don't want to bring Myoume into anything that she's not a part of."

His gaze flitted down once more to the chamber below. It was small and simply furnished, and the Meihi had made no attempt to properly settle himself, making Miramu wonder if he truly intended to spend the night there, or if he had other things in mind. Odds and ends among the man's belongings also supported the idea that he had not made his journey alone, and Miramu's eyes narrowed as he contemplated this.

"The question is, then, where is Shi Maichu?" He wondered. "Clearly he really did leave Hokkan with Hyoushin. That's a no-brainer if ever there was one. But now… they've gone separate ways? Still, Kikei did say that I didn't need to kill the boy. That he'd be like a dog without a master, if Hyoushin was taken from the equation. I needn't worry about him — it's not in my orders to kill him. It's Hyoushin that I want. And it's Hyoushin that I'll take."

At this moment, Hyoushin paused in his preparations, glancing suddenly upwards as if he had heard Miramu's thoughts and the assassin froze, half-afraid that somehow the enigmatic tribesman had managed to see through his spell. However, at that moment a mouse scuttled across the beam opposite and Miramu bit his lip, cursing his own edginess.

"Of course he can't see me." He muttered. "Only Myoume can see me, when I hide myself from others' sight. Get a grip, Miramu. Your prey is right in front of you. Surely it wouldn't be so hard to do it here and now?"

His fingers slipped towards his dagger, then he paused, shaking his head.

"No." He cautioned himself. "That's not what I decided to do. Easy as it would be to take him unawares, I want to see the look in his eyes when he realises I've proven him wrong. And besides, there's another thing I want, too. I want to find out what's so special about this Sukunami Hikari. Maybe if I do that — or discover something about Suzaku's Shinzahou — I guess maybe I'll have some leverage to pry information out of that sly old Priest. His actions and his motivations are becoming erratic and uncertain. First he was loath to kill Aoiketsu

because Kintsusei favoured him — now he's seriously discussed a desire to do so. That change in his manner worries me… I want to know how he is thinking before I agree to take on any more of his assignments. For money it might be, but my level of charge may rise if there's a considerable amount of added danger."

He chewed down on his lip, eying the Meihi disparagingly.

"And then there's his desire to be rid of you. Myoume's prophesy has evidently spooked him, or I can't imagine that he'd bother about you otherwise." He decided. "Dressed like that… are you claiming you still belong to your tribal roots, then?"

He smirked, amused by that thought.

"If so, you're more deluded than I am." He reflected. "You're a killer, Hyoushin. An executioner. A puppet for your Emperor. Even now you pursue this — even though you believe he's forsaken you, you know no other path than this one. Dressed as a member of a fading tribe, struggling against an enemy who's more than matched you for wits at every turn so far. *And* being stalked by an assassin… whose presence you can't even trace. I will speak for you yet, you know… once I've learnt a little more about your motives to come here. Aoiketsu must have discovered something useful — and much as it's foolish to become involved in Kutou's political upheaval, I'm curious to know what it is."

Hyoushin got to his feet at that moment, moving to the basin of water that stood by the chipped old wash-stand in the corner, and dipping his pale fingers into the cool liquid as he splashed it onto his face. In an instant Miramu understood the Meihi's languid behaviour and his delay in acting, and he smirked, amused.

"So the snowman melts in the hot sun, does he?" He murmured ironically. "That's amusing. It may yet work to my advantage, too — after Sairou, Kounan's heat has no impact on me at all."

For a moment Hyoushin eyed his own reflection in the smoke-glass mirror, and Miramu found himself wondering what the older man was thinking. Then the moment had passed, and, scooping up his sword, the tribesman pushed open the door, stepping out into the hall.

Once he was gone, Miramu dropped deftly down from the beam, dusting himself off as he considered his next move.

"You're going after Aoi. You must be." He decided. "That boy would follow you through hell and high water and you're running out of options. Even Kikei realises that you'll want to make contact with

him… but it's not my business to interfere in that. I am here only to kill you. Not to prevent the passing of information from one man to another, after all."

A faint smile touched his lips.

"Aoiketsu is my weakness." He realised ruefully, glancing at his hands. "Myoume aside, I've never felt strongly about not wanting to end someone's life. I don't fully understand it, but I know that I would regret it, if I killed Seiryuu's surviving son. Perhaps it's that fact, after all. There's no doubt in my mind that he must be Nakago's son. It's the only explanation I have for the oddness that surrounds him. His father was as perverse a demon as my own — and he as oblivious to it as I was until my step-father laid the information at my door. He is weak and pathetic — he vomits at blood and yet… inside of him… a stronger man exists. I sense it about him — that he is, in essence, no different from me. We are reflections… the same."

He faltered, frowning as he considered this fact.

"Do I really believe that?" He wondered. "That inside of Aoiketsu, a Nakago lurks? A man ruthless enough to kill without compunction — a man angry enough to seek vengeance without regret? And do I want to bring that man out, or am I really trying to prevent that… by warning him, by leaving him alone? I wish I knew. It isn't like me to think this way… but he is so like me. So like me… the way I was."

He frowned, shaking his head as if to clear it.

"There's no place in this world for naïve fools, and Hyoushin's death will teach Aoi that lesson as clearly as anything else." He decided. "It's the cruelty of life — in the end, all that matters is whether or not he'll be strong enough to face up to it. If he isn't, well, maybe then I will kill him. For his own good — I won't put on him this twisted life I lead. But if he *is* strong enough… if he can fight it and still move forwards without crumbling… then perhaps I'll see a way to find that path, also. A way out of this… whatever way that is."

He glanced at his hands, taking in the rough black gloves that covered his fingers from view.

"These hands have taken too many lives for me to find that kind of path now." He reflected. "But even to know one exists… that would be enough. It's foolish of me, but I like that boy. And I want… him to stay… as he is now."

He clenched his fists, bringing his hands slowly together as he focused his energy on the outside of the inn. As he re-materialised in

the busy street, he threw up his shields once more, melting into the surroundings as he observed Hyoushin making his exit from the ramshackle white-fronted building. He nodded his head, making up his mind what was to be done.

“Follow him, and he’ll lead me to Aoi and the Eastern Village — the source of the knowledge everyone seeks.” He decided. “Kill him, and take the information I can take back to Kutou. I’m fully committed to a life of chaos, and it’s too late to change that now, even if I felt the desire to do so. That’s my task, after all. It’ll be Aoi’s test, perhaps. His first test, I imagine, of many yet to come. Men like him — men like me — that’s how life is, after all. I suppose in the end, maybe it’ll be a kindness — taking him out of the shadow of that soulless, unimaginative ghost.”

Chapter 6

Chapter Five

It was late.

Chichiri leant up against the window frame, gazing pensively out at the night terrain as he contemplated the day's events. Across the farmland he could make out the faint silhouette of a sole figure, and he chewed absently down on his lip, inwardly wondering what exactly was on the boy's mind.

"Aoi's been restless since his return here." He decided. "It's not just his anxiety over Hikari or his confusion over his past. I trust him — I think he's on our side. Yet he's agitated too. It's more than just his demeanour — something in his aura is prickling and dancing with uncertainty and it's unsettled him. Perhaps it's also unsettled me… I wonder about that. It's not usual for me to be unable to sleep, after all."

He glanced up at the moon, gauging its position then nodding his head as if confirming something to himself.

"It's quite some time past midnight." He realised. "Aidou and the children went to bed a long time ago, and so did Myoume and Hikari. I wonder if I should go out there and speak to him. It's all very well spending time with stars — as I know from my own experience. But they don't speak as much as you'd like them to do — and I doubt that Suzaku's stars would be able to give young Aoiketsu an awful lot in the way of spiritual guidance."

He sighed, glancing at his hands.

"Nakago's son has become my charge as well as Tamahome's daughter." He realised ruefully. "That's something which I never expected to happen. And to talk so plainly to the boy about the things his father did and suffered — was that wrong, then? But I don't want him to hate Nakago. Even *I* don't hate the man, not now. Not since I came to understand his reasons for being the man he was. After all, when Tasuki and I encountered his spirit form guarding Seiryuu's Shinzahou so long ago, he was nothing but a sentry — he had no interest in fighting, or reigniting old battles. Seiryuu's treasure truly was a casket of tears, and after coming to understand that, I don't think I could harbour hate for any of them. Even so, though… for

Aoiketsu it's a confusing situation. And he's here to protect Hikari, but Kutou is still foremost on his mind. As it should be, for a man born with Seiryuu's blood — but it means there's very little comfort Suzaku can truly give him. At least, at present. Until he comes to understand fully that in the end, it's all about the same thing."

"Chichiri?" A voice from the doorway made him turn, offering a surprised smile as he registered the presence of the young Byakko mage watching him. Her snow-white hair was loose and tousled around her face, giving her an odd, ethereal look, and she was wrapped in a night robe, a clear indication that she had until very recently been sleeping as peacefully as the young Ri children. There was something strange in her seiran eyes, however, and Chichiri pursed his lips, beckoning for her to join him.

"Something's bothering you?" He asked softly. "It's very late, Myoume. Long past midnight… I thought you and Hikari had both gone to bed."

"We did." Myoume agreed. "And Hikari's still fast asleep — I didn't want to disturb her since she's worked so hard today on honing her Suzaku magic. It's just… something woke me. And even though I don't want to acknowledge it — if I didn't tell you, it might… be the worst for everyone."

"I see." Chichiri's expression became grave. "Then take a seat and tell me whatever it is you think I should know."

Myoume crossed the room slowly, sinking down into one of the empty chairs. For a moment she seemed to compose herself, then she raised her gaze to Chichiri's.

"Miramu is here." She said softly.

Chichiri's good eye widened in alarm.

"Here?" He echoed. "What do you mean by here? In the village? On the mountain? Where?"

"Near the village if not actually within it." Myoume said sadly. "I told you, it was news I didn't want to bring. I don't know why he's here — he hasn't let me see his motives, I just know he's around. He's keeping a low profile, however. You haven't sensed him at all?"

"Not once." Chichiri looked anxious. "But if he's nearby… Myoume…"

"Your family will be safe enough so long as I'm around to protect them." Myoume said with a sigh. "Miramu doesn't want to fight me at

the moment — presumably because he knows that if he doesn't face me yet, nothing and noone else can kill him until we do face one another and fight. That being the case, he'll avoid this place so long as I'm in situe — and I've no plans to go anywhere. Meikyo and Eiju won't be harmed, Chichiri. I promise."

"I have faith in you." Chichiri forced himself to relax, shaking his head ruefully. "I'm sorry. The instincts of a protective father sometimes overrule my common sense. But the last time Miramu came to the village, he hurt my daughter. And after what befell Jin in Sairou…"

"Yes." Myoume nodded. "I know. I'm sorry, Chichiri. I feel responsible… for all those things."

"And that's stupid." Chichiri told her frankly. "You've been nothing but helpful since you joined our side and more than that, your advice has proven correct on more than one occasion. It's hard to believe you're no more than twenty — you speak with the wisdom of one much older. I value your counsel, Myoume. We all do. You have nothing to feel guilty for."

Myoume was silent for a moment. Then she shrugged.

"I wonder about that." She murmured softly, and Chichiri eyed her quizzically.

"I don't understand?"

"Well, nor do I, always." Myoume admitted. "Byakko's power — Toroki's sight — it runs through me like an obsession sometimes. And it means I see things… and often say them whether it's wise to do so or not. I told my brother that we would one day fight, and he turned against me because of it. I disclosed to Jin his fate should he be in Kitora's shrine — maybe by doing so I drew him there, and condemned him — who knows? And when I told you before we went north that Aoiketsu would save Hikari's life, I… I knew that it was true. But I also… made sure it was true. By leaving Hikari alone with Aoi — in order for her life to be threatened, and for him to reveal his true motives of his own accord."

She glanced across at the solitary figure highlighted only by the glint of the summer moon.

"I'm starting to worry a little about him." She admitted. "I've encouraged him to form a bond with Hikari — perhaps I've even manipulated that too, by telling them there's nothing to be done to fight it. Byakko — Seiryuu, Genbu, and Suzaku too, probably — they

need Hikari and Aoi to have that bond. They need… another kind of Aoiketsu to come forth and fight to defend Suzaku no Shinzahou. I don't understand that clearly yet, Chichiri… but I do know that Aoi as he is now isn't going to be able to stand firm against everything that is to come. So I know I have to keep pushing — keep manipulating. I even let him fight and kill a man on our journey North, because I needed to be sure he could do it, if the need arose. For her sake — that he'd push forward and spill blood on her behalf. It was a risk, deceiving them and claiming I could not use my power when I could easily have removed the threat without bloodshed. But even so, I acted this way. Maybe I was testing him — I don't know. And it bothers me to think it… but I know that I must continue."

"It isn't easy to play the prophet, huh?" Chichiri asked gently. "To see all the threads and to weave them together into the correct pattern?"

"No." Myoume ran her fingers through her hair. "I can't help but wonder whether or not Miramu's appearance here is accidental or by design. And if it's by design, whether or not it's because of my pushing Hikari to Aoiketsu's side. I've made Aoi a traitor to his country — at least most likely in the eyes of his commander. And if that word got back to Kintsusei-sama in Kutou, perhaps he'd be so compelled…"

"To send an assassin to destroy the leak?" Chichiri said softly. Myoume nodded.

"I like Aoi." She said sadly. "I like him a lot. Hikari and Shishi too… they're all people I consider friends, and I haven't had friends in a long long time. But Toroki's power still has to take precedence. I had a dark sense of foreboding when I woke up, Chichiri. That something is going to happen… from which there'll be no going back."

"To Aoiketsu, you mean?" Chichiri asked. Myoume sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

"I don't know." She admitted. "That's the frustrating part. I think it has something to do with his comrade — the soldier Shi Maichu, and whatever it is that's still swirling through me where he's concerned. Miramu's involvement — since he's here, it can't be doubted. I just… I have such a bad feeling. And yet…"

She paused, placing her hands against the glass as she gazed across the farmland.

"I don't think Aoi is going to be killed by Miramu." She said at length. "I don't think that's what I'm sensing. Perhaps what I'm feeling is something worse than that — something darker within him that's

stirring even now, in little bits and pieces. A side of Kaiga Aoiketsu that even he doesn't know exists."

Chichiri's eyes narrowed.

"You mean, Nakago's legacy to him?" He asked, and Myoume nodded.

"I'm starting to think that way." She admitted. "Chichiri, I… I've had a thought. And it disturbs me, but the more I think about it, the more I'm certain that it's true. You'll understand this better even than I do, I think — I'm sure you remember what it was like, to protect Suzaku no Miko from harm."

"Yes, indeed." Chichiri smiled. "It wasn't an easy job, either. But one I felt compelled to undertake, no matter what. Even at the cost of my life — that was how strong the desire ran within me. Within all of us, I think — Tasuki'd doubtless say the same. But I'm not sure I follow what you mean. Suzaku no Miko's not here now — and Hikari is a different matter completely."

"Yes, she is." Myoume bit her lip, then, "Chichiri, what if we've been looking at this all wrong?"

"Meaning?" Chichiri sent her a startled glance. "You'll need to be clearer — I'm not following your thought pattern at all."

"Well, let me put it another way." Myoume said slowly. "What if Nakago… weren't dead? And the other Seiryuu Seishi… what if they were still here, too? Only they're not, because of the war with Kounan and the events of eighteen years ago. That can't be helped — right?"

"All right…" Chichiri said doubtfully. "I still don't see where you're going with this, but okay. For argument's sake, we'll say that somehow they still live… after all, let's not forget that Amiboshi still does."

"Exactly." Myoume agreed, and Chichiri stared at her in confusion.

"Pardon me?"

"You told me that Hikari could sense Seiryuu no Shinzahou really strongly when you were in Makan." Myoume said softly. "And more than that, that somehow Amiboshi was drawn to save her from the snow. A dark night, a blizzard — a man in his own home minding his own business… yet somehow he knew there was someone struggling outside. Someone who needed his help… and someone he was compelled to save."

She sighed, spreading her hands.

“The others are dead.” She added. “But we know that elements of Nakago’s spirit exist within Aoiketsu’s aura. He’s not Nakago — but he carries the man’s blood, even if not his Seishi power. In many ways, Aoi’s just another soldier — but he’s stronger and quicker as a fighter than most of his comrades are able to be. And on odd occasions, Chichiri, I’ve seen the look in his eye. When he fights, there’s that glint of killer instinct there. It first put me onto the idea that if elements of Nakago’s spirit still did lurk within him, the squeamishness he suffers wasn’t an accident but a failsafe Seiryuu instilled in him to prevent him turning out like his father. Which begs the question… why is he so driven to protect Hikari that he’ll do what he’s never done before and even kill someone who threatens her? He said himself that he’d not taken a man’s life before that incident with the circus. Yet he doesn’t seem troubled by it — it was a justified act carried out by a man who has no doubts in the thing he is defending.”

“I think I’m starting to see your way of thinking.” Chichiri’s expression became troubled. “You think that Aoi’s driven to protect Hikari because Nakago was one of Seiryuu’s chosen and it’s that element of his nature waking up inside of him. Little by little… he’s taking on the role of protector. And it isn’t anything to do with the fact Hikari is Suzaku’s Shinzahou — although it’s beyond doubt that that’s what she is. It’s more to do with something else — something that we hadn’t considered at all, even when we were in Hokkan with Amiboshi. Taiitsukun’s said it too — that she can’t raise Suzaku because she’s not Suzaku no Miko and Kounan’s legend is over. But… maybe we’ve been taking that too much at face value. Hikari can’t raise Suzaku because she isn’t supposed to raise Suzaku. We’re looking to the wrong god… it’s *Seiryuu* she’s truly here to raise.”

“That’s what I’m thinking.” Myoume sighed. “And Aoi has taken on Nakago’s role. In the absence of Seishi for Seiryuu, he’s all there is left. Amiboshi did his bit in Makan — but he wants no part in further fighting and I doubt he’d be lured out of exile to join the party now. But Aoi — I felt from the moment I met him that Aoi’s birth was no accident of timing. The Kaiga estate was ransacked and all were killed — except Hyoushin, the man who would train the boy, and Ruiren, the woman who would birth him. His mother was weak and dying, yet she managed to live long enough to deliver a son — a healthy, strong son — who by chance inherited his father’s blue eyes instead of her more common dark Kutou ones.”

“I thought you believed Hyoushin was our enemy?” Chichiri asked quietly, and Myoume twisted her fingers together, agitation clear in her gaze.

“Perhaps my assumptions are wrong.” She admitted. “They are only that — assumptions, Chichiri. Guesses based on the fact that Hyoushin was a slave who must have suffered plenty under the Imperial regime. But if Seiryuu knew better… and Byakko hasn’t given me any clear indication of Hyoushin’s significance. That he has one is beyond doubt — but I’m no longer so certain of what it is.”

“Then Aoiketsu’s faith in his commander is justified?”

“So I’m beginning to think.” Myoume sighed. “And more, if we think along those lines… it’s him we have to thank for the fact Aoiketsu is not a bloodthirsty killer. Aoi said that himself, if only I’d bothered to listen to it properly. The reason he wouldn’t fight Shishi in Choukou — because he’d been trained only to fight when necessary, not just for the sake of fighting.”

She glanced down.

“Perhaps because it was *Hyoushin* who took from me the Shinzahou, I’ve become biased in my judgment.” She admitted. “That incident coupled with my certainty of a tribal traitor… but maybe it’s not Hyoushin after all. Perhaps Seiryuu has had a greater purpose for him all the time… and I’ve just been stupid not to see it.”

“Don’t be harsh on yourself.” Chichiri scolded. “You can’t see everything, even with Toroki’s sight. No matter how much you try, Myoume — noone has perfect judgement. And no harm has come by your assumption… if you’re right about Hikari’s connection to Seiryuu, then we still have time to strategise accordingly. And, clearly, involve Aoiketsu since his significance suddenly becomes more clear.”

“I’ve always seen Nakago’s son as Hikari’s protector.” Myoume agreed. “I didn’t understand why, then. But now I do. Aoi’s been raised to fight for and believe in Kutou — his entire life has been building towards the coming of Seiryuu no Miko for the second time. In truth, I’ve never seen Hikari in my visions as the Phoenix — she’s never once been Suzaku’s representative. She’s only ever been light — strong and reassuring, but not taking on any decisive form. Maybe this is why. Maybe it’s because she belongs to *two* Gods, not one. It seems like Seiryuu’s trying again to put right what went wrong before. We know Seiryuu’s legend should not have played out alongside Suzaku’s. Now Seiryuu wants to set things right. And Hikari’s his chosen emissary. That’s why we have to go to Kutou. That’s why we have to do all of this… so that somehow Hikari can raise Seiryuu and bring peace to Kutou. If she can do that…”

“Then everything else will be saved, too.” Chichiri murmured. “Yes.

It all makes sense now. I think you might be right, Myoume."

"We shouldn't mention this to Hikari yet." Myoume cautioned. "I think… it might confuse and scare her. She's working so hard — let her continue doing that. She'll need her strength, after all."

"You're not kidding." Chichiri said grimly. "Seiryuu almost succeeded in devouring Yui, when she raised him and made her wishes. She wasn't strong enough to withstand him — and I won't let that happen to Hikari. There's no Suzaku no Miko to save her, after all. She'll have to be strong enough in her own heart to do this — otherwise we'll be in a worse situation than we already are."

"What kind of worse situation?"

Aoiketsu's voice startled them both and the sorcerer turned, shooting the young soldier a tired smile.

"We were simply discussing our options, when we go to Kutou." He said evenly. "Aoi-kun, it's late and you should get some sleep."

"I can't sleep. I'm too restless." Aoiketsu admitted. "I've had a lot to think about. I can't explain it, but I'm on edge tonight. Like there's something in the wind… but I can't put my finger on what."

"Probably my brother." Myoume said acidly, and Aoiketsu stared at her.

"Miramu?" He demanded. "He's here? In the village?"

Anger flared in his blue eyes, and Chichiri pursed his lips, registering the glitter of something beyond normal conviction in the young man's gaze.

"Yes." He said quietly. "But Myoume doesn't think he'll attack the house. Hikari should be safe enough under this roof — Myoume's here to ward him off, after all."

"But that doesn't help the people in the village." Aoiketsu's gaze narrowed. "He shouldn't be here. Why is he here?"

"If we knew that, we'd be a lot better off." Myoume sighed. "But all I know is that he's somewhere near the village perimeter. More I can't tell you — more I don't know."

"Then I'll go see if I can find out." Aoiketsu decided, and Chichiri shook his head, resting a hand on the soldier's shoulder.

"Don't be rash." He cautioned. "There's no sense in fighting a man with the abilities Amefuri possesses. Hikari wouldn't like it, if you came off the worst for the encounter."

“To be honest, I need to work off some of this tension somehow.” Aoiketsu admitted. “Maybe it’s him being here that’s making me feel so at odds with myself, anyway. Let me go, Chichiri. I’ll be all right — I promise. Miramu’s not tried to kill me yet… I don’t think I’ll be in any real danger from him and maybe I can lure him away.”

“There’s a possibility that it’s you he’s come to find, Aoi.” Myoume warned him, and Aoiketsu shrugged.

“All the more reason for me to go.” He said frankly. “Look, Myoume, you said yourself that I was here to protect Hikari — right? That that was my destiny — to fight and defend her till she could save Kutou. Yes?”

“Yes, but…”

“If that’s the case, I’m not going to be killed tonight, am I?” Aoiketsu shrugged. “I’m in Kounan. Not Kutou. We’re not there yet, and I still have things to do — by your own testimony. So I’m going out there… and I’ll come back just fine. You’ll see. Or do you doubt your own predictions?”

“A little, sometimes.” Myoume admitted. “But… you’re not wrong, Aoi. Everything I’ve seen indicates that you are a part of what will happen in Kutou — whatever that may be.”

“Then I’ll go and chase that shadow away from this village.” Aoiketsu said firmly. “It’s my duty to, after all. Chichiri, please — let me go.”

“Don’t do anything stupid.” Chichiri said softly, reluctantly releasing his grip on the man’s shoulder as he realised there would be no changing the soldier’s mind. “You can be hurt, if not killed, and besides — Hikari’s presence means nothing in this world is completely certain. Keep a hold of your wits, all right? Don’t try and be a hero. People have been killed for less — and Hikari needs you.”

“I’ll be careful.” Aoiketsu promised. Then he faltered. “Oh… but…”

“Something up?” Myoume eyed him curiously, and Aoiketsu grimaced.

“I’ve fought with Shishi’s sword, but she has that on the mountain.” He admitted. “Shit. I hate being without my weapon… I keep forgetting that I don’t have it easily to hand.”

Chichiri hesitated for a moment. Then he crossed the room, scooping up the *shinken* from its place beside his *shakujou*.

“Take this, then.” He said evenly. “Reizeitei-sama’s taken you into

his trust now, so it should be all right for you to use it — especially if you're using it to defend Suzaku no Shinzahou from harm. And from what I know, you're a fine enough swordsman to do it justice — even if you can't raise Suzaku's spirit from within it."

"Are you sure?" Aoiketsu looked startled, and Chichiri nodded.

"Just for heaven's sake don't lose it." He begged. "Else I'll be in trouble, not just you."

"And Aoi — please don't kill my brother." Myoume added. "I mean… I don't think you can, but… please. Even though he's… I'd rather… you didn't."

"That all depends on him." Carefully Aoiketsu took the sword, strapping it to his belt. "I won't kill anyone if I don't have to. But I'm going to protect Hikari, and I'm going to go all out to do that. I'm decided, Myoume. I'm going to chase that shadow away from the Eastern Village — no matter what!"

So he was Suzaku's prisoner, was he?

Maichu sank down onto the end of the rough, low-slung pallet bed, gazing around him at his surroundings with a grudging sense of acceptance. After all, he reasoned, Hyoushin *had* ordered him to find the bandit's mountain. That he'd become entangled with them on the way had been an additional complication to his duty, but in the end he had succeeded in locating Reikaku-zan. Somewhere beneath his feet, he supposed, the bandits were concealing the precious relic belonging to Suzaku's mage Hisei, and absently he wondered what his chances might be of escaping his cell and locating it before the sun rose over the Southern terrain.

"After all, if we had that, maybe we'd be a step closer to findin' the Shinzahou." He murmured. "An' Aoi. We need to find him, too. I don't know though — I'm not sure I can figure these Suzaku people out. That Tasuki guy, and that spitfire wench with the sword… I guess it's no kidding that these ain't ordinary bandits. An' I need to play it careful. They don't know the Commander was with me, an' I won't be telling them so, so he should be okay even if I'm here. But… if they know who Aoi and I both are…"

He sighed, getting to his feet as he padded across the small, dusty chamber to the wall which held what was supposed to be a window, although the glass was so clouded and cracked it was impossible to see much through it. The room he had been confined in was cramped and dark, but he had at least been provided with somewhere to sleep

and, in the hours before the noise and lights on the mountain had begun to peter out for the night, someone had thrust some food through a grate in the door. By that point Maichu had been both ravenous and parched, and the cool, slightly bitter stream water that accompanied his bare rations meal had been almost as welcome as the bread and meat itself.

Reikaku-zan might be the stronghold of some of Kounan's most notorious bandits, but it seemed that despite that, they had their own sense of honour.

The walk back up the mountain had been a tiring one, although his captor and his young companion had managed it without even breaking a sweat, and by the time they had reached the top, Maichu had known he would not have been able to fight even if he had somehow been able to spirit his sword from the young girl's care. That she had so easily bested him rankled against his pride somewhat, but, he mused ruefully, at least none of his regiment had been there to see him laid flat by a girl.

"I went easy on her, and I paid for it." He decided regretfully. "I guess fightin' with women has a different meaning in the South. I'm used to them yellin', screamin', cryin' and complainin' when they want to kick up a fuss — but that kid was somethin' else entirely. Maybe that's why Kounan are so damn successful. I never knew they trained their girls to hold swords as well as their men. But she had been trained — an' dammit, she wasn't half bad. For a girl."

He leant up against the wall, feeling the gentle whisper of the cool night breeze as it teased through his hair, cooling him somewhat from the heat of the Kounan day. Although he had not been as affected by the sun as his Commander, the walk to Reikaku-zan's summit had taken its toll and in the confined space of his makeshift prison, he was glad of even the slightest trickle of air.

"Tomorrow, Hyoushin-sama'll be waitin' for me in Souun." He reflected grimly, glancing at his hands as he contemplated his best course of action. "I might be able to fight that kid, if I managed to get my sword back — but this mountain's full to the teeth of brawny fightin' men an' worst of all, there's that damn Kashira… of all people to be trailin', I have to pick on the Suzaku Seishi who rules this godforsaken ant-heap. Even so, though — he's treated me pretty fair so far. An' he did talk about Aoi — about bringing Aoi to the mountain, or talkin' to him — or somethin'. Aoi'll get me outta here, I'm sure… once he knows that we came to find him. If he is all buddy-buddy with Kounan's people now — I'm probably better jus' leavin' it

to him. Besides, he needs to know what shit's been goin' on in Kutou. An' I want to take somethin' positive back to Hyoushin-sama with me."

He sighed.

"I damn well wish that he was fully on the ball, though." He acknowledged to himself. "There's a doubt about him I don't like an' it bothers me. It's like this whole business has shaken him more'n he'll let me see… sometimes I really can't make him out. He's worryin' — about the Emperor, about us bein' found out — shit, maybe even that someone's comin' to silence him once and for all. And this goddamn sun ain't helpin' — the sooner we find Aoi, the sooner we can work out some contingency plan for leavin' for Kutou. An' once we're back in Eastern climate, I reckon the Commander'll be much better off. This heat ain't doin' him any good — he's barely eaten since we left an' I'm sure he wouldn't have sent me alone to track someone like that Tasuki guy if he'd been thinking on his wits. It's a problem."

He snorted.

"Shit, it really *must* be a problem, if I'm thinkin' about gettin' back to Souun in order to make sure he's okay." He berated himself. "This is Hyoushin-sama, you goon. You don't need to protect him. He's the best soldier in Kutou at the moment. The one who noone can disarm — I bet not even Suzaku's people could knock that blade from his grip. He'll be fine. Worry about yourself, Maichu, you idiot! You're holed up in a cell on some dusty mountain waitin' for them to decide what to do with you — an' just because they seem to be reasonable, well, it doesn't mean that they are."

He sauntered back to his makeshift bed, dropping down onto it once more and stretching out on his back as he stared up at the cracked plaster and criss-crossed beam-work that comprised the ceiling over his head. In the gloom, he could just make out the silhouette of a spider as it scuttled from one side of the beam to another, and at the sight of it, he smirked.

"Are you havin' a joke with me?" He demanded. "You can get in an' outta here no problems. Me, I'm stuck. There ain't no way in or out 'cept through that bolted door — an' believe me I know. I've tried every damn trick I know since they left me to myself. I guess this time the spider's really met his match — short of breakin' this window an' throwin' myself down the side of the mountain, I'm stuck. An' havin' seen the sheer cliff face that this place is propped up on top of — no thank you. I'll take my chances with the bandits. At least with them there's a chance of negotiation."

He sighed, closing his eyes.

“Nothing else to do but sleep on it an’ hope tomorrow things right themselves.” He decided at length. “Aoi-kun, you have some freakish friends, you know that? Shit, I really hope you do know what you’re doin’, fraternisin’ with the South like this. So far Kounan’s people make no sense to me… believe me, if we do see one another tomorrow, it ain’t just gonna be me spoutin’ answers. I want to know a few from you, too — I want to know everything, this time around — and so will Hyoushin-sama. Whether this girl you’ve taken up with really is our Miko an’ whether that’s the solution you thought was too dangerous to tell Kutou’s court. I want to be in the picture, an’ involved. Even if Toroki did predict some horrible fate for me — well, I ain’t superstitious an’ I can make my own future. I’m damn sure I’m noone’s celestial puppet in all of this. So it’s time you quit protecting me, an’ time you told us all the facts. After all, at the end of the day, Kintsusei-sama’s life might well depend on it.”

Chapter 7

Chapter Six

The village was eerie and silent as Aoiketsu crept between the rows of houses, his hand firmly clutched around the hilt of the blessed sword as he made his way carefully and slowly towards the perimeter of the small southern settlement. Inwardly he knew that what he was doing was foolish, for Miramu was a master of concealment and with the onset of darkness, the young soldier realised that he was at even more of a disadvantage. Miramu was, after all, the Shadow of the West — and Aoiketsu knew only too well from his reputation that the first indication of his presence might well be a fatal bolt from the black.

But even despite that fact, he knew that he had had to leave the farmhouse.

"I don't know what's been wrong with me since we got back here." He reflected, as an owl hooted suddenly from the trees, making him start and half-draw his weapon before he realised what the sound was. "I really am on edge. Was it all those things that Chichiri told me about my father? Or is it just worrying about the fact we're going back to Kutou? Hikari's working as hard as she can, dammit — I can see that, even if I don't understand the power she has. And I want her to get stronger — I want her to be able to save Kutou. But… if she does that… I'm also going to lose her. And I don't want that to happen either."

He glanced up at the sky, taking in the colour of the moon with a frown.

"It's not long before dawn." He realised. "The sun rises early in the south, and I've had no rest at all. I'm a fool, aren't I? What use am I to Hikari if I don't at least get a night's sleep? But like this I *can't* sleep — I need to work it out of my system, whatever 'it' is."

He groaned, shaking his head as if to clear it.

"Get your head straight, idiot." He berated himself firmly. "You knew that Hikari would go back to her world from almost the start. It's just how it is. Your responsibility is to make sure she manages to save Kutou safely — whatever the reason you're here to do it. If you really love her, after all, you'll do the right thing about it and step

back… you can't try and tie her to a world in which she doesn't really belong."

At this moment he reached the rough cluster of briar and hedgerow which made up the southern perimeter of the Eastern Village and for a moment he paused, glancing all around him for anything unusual. There was nothing, however, just the gentle rustle of tree branches as the summer breeze teased through the leaves above his head, and with a sigh he stepped forward into the forestland, his senses on full alert as he searched for any hint of Miramu's presence.

But there was nothing.

"I shouldn't be surprised by that. Even *Chichiri* can't always sense when he's around, so I've no chance." He realised. "What the hell is he doing here, anyhow? *Is* he here for me? Dammit, to *kill* me? Or to talk to me? Maybe he's brought a message from Kutou — but shit, I don't want a conversation with him this close to Chichiri's village! After what he did to Meikyo — this isn't a place a man like him should be. Not when there are small children around."

As he stepped over the criss-cross track of a night creature, he heard the faintest sound of movement from the trees beyond and he froze, every nerve strained as he tried to work out whether it was his overactive imagination or whether there truly was someone else lurking around the undergrowth. Common sense told him that anyone moving around at this time of night would most likely be someone up to no good, and he tensed, ready for action as his grip tightened once more around the hilt of Reizeitei's precious *shinken*.

But there was silence, and Aoiketsu frowned, taking a deep breath into his lungs as he struggled to calm down.

"Stop it, idiot. You'll hallucinate something next." He scolded himself, stepping absently into the fragmented moonlight that broke through the branches from the clear sky above. "You can't see anything, and every bird movement or animal noise you're ready to draw your weapon. Damn, it's a good thing Maichu can't see you right now. He'd be laughing his head off, watching you freak out and prepare to decapitate some poor defenceless forest creature!"

Just as he was about to relax his grasp on the red, gold and white hilt between his fingers, something came out of the darkness towards him, and instinctively he leapt back, drawing his sword as it clattered loudly against the steel of another blade. He muttered a curse, feeling the slick wetness of blood drip down his fingers as the swing of the assailant's weapon caught the edge of his hand, and in that instant he

thanked the stars for the darkness, aware that if he could not see his wound, he would be less susceptible to a squeamish reaction.

“Who the hell are you!?” He demanded. “Miramu, if that’s you, dammit, show yourself and explain why the hell you’re here! You think you’re hiding, but dammit, we know you’re in Kounan! You might as well give it up — I don’t want to fight with you!”

There was no answer, merely the swooping sound of a sword arm cutting through the air, and a sudden glint of silver light as the stranger’s weapon clashed once more against the glimmering blade of the holy *shinken*. Aoiketsu’s eyes narrowed as he parried the shot, pushing his assailant back as he steadied his stance, preparing himself for another onslaught.

“This isn’t funny!” He exclaimed. “I don’t want to play games — show yourself, and state your business!”

Again there was no answer, though for the briefest of instances Aoiketsu thought he saw the outline of a figure silhouetted against the trees. Then the illusion was gone, but in that brief moment both relief and apprehension flooded through him anew as he realised whoever he was now fighting was too tall and broadly built to be the elusive, sardonic assassin.

“And Miramu fights with a bow or a dagger. *Not* with a sword.” He realised. “Shit, so is this… one of Kaou-zan’s thugs? Shishi did say that they’re always trying to stir up trouble for Tasuki on Reikaku-zan. Maybe they’re raiding the Eastern Village — perhaps this has nothing to do with us or Suzaku at all! Dammit, of all the times… but at least I’m here. And shit, I’m not going to lose to some thug of a bandit. I’ll show him just what Imperial training means!”

With that he gathered his resolve, swinging his sword with a yell as he launched himself forwards. There was a quick succession of parrying and slashing as the two swords met and pushed against one another through the trees, and Aoiketsu soon realised that whoever he was fighting was also no novice fighter. He had both the quick reflexes and careful skill of someone who had been professionally trained, and absently the soldier began racking his brains as he struggled to identify the man’s particular fighting style.

“Noone told me Kaou-zan’s lot could fight like proper men.” He muttered. “Well, fine then. I’m no average soldier, either. In the dark, I can’t see blood, so it can’t affect me. I can’t see my opponent, but I don’t have to do that to bring him down. If this guy means mischief for the Eastern Village then shit, I’m going to make sure he changes

his mind. I'm here to protect, dammit — and that's what I'm going to do!"

He raised the *shinken* again, catching another fleeting glimpse of his assailant in the flickering moonlight and he let out a yell, charging forward as he pumped renewed resolve into wielding the heavy blade. This time his determination seemed to pay off somewhat, for he was aware of his foe pulling back, and despite himself a smirk touched his lips.

"You were lucky that time. A couple of inches closer and I'd have killed you." He said frankly. "You should withdraw now, because I'm not letting you past me. This village is out of bounds to rogues from Kaou-zan, or thugs or bandits from anywhere outside of Reikaku-zan's territory. I'm here to protect the people and I'm damn well going to protect them. And I'm not a pushover. My Commander taught me to fight better than that."

There was a rustle of branches, then a fresh glitter of steel, and Aoiketsu brought the flat of the *shinken* up before his face, parrying the blow as he pushed the attacker back.

"I told you. You're *not* going to take me down." He said bluntly. "I don't want to kill you, but if I have to, I will. There are innocent people living in this village and they don't need a visit from someone who likes attacking strangers in the dead of the night. I'm not going to let you through and I won't give up. I was trained only to kill when necessary — but if it means protecting the people here, I'll do whatever I have to do."

There was a moment of hesitation, and Aoiketsu wondered if his attacker was having second thoughts. He smirked, tossing the *shinken* briefly from his right hand to his left and then back to his right as adrenalin surged through his body.

"Are you scared?" He asked softly. "I'm not just another mountain bandit you've picked a fight with tonight. I'm a soldier of Kutou's Imperial Guard and I'll show you what it means to be a member of the Emperor's retinue! My Commander taught me never to give up when there's something worth fighting for and I mean to do *just* that!"

For a moment there was nothing, and Aoiketsu almost wondered if his opponent had somehow slipped away through the trees. Then, from the blackness behind him was the sudden sound of someone moving and even as Aoiketsu swung around, something clashed against his sword arm hard and fast, sending the *shinken* flying from his fingers. He let out a curse as it spun through the air, glittering in

the moonlight as it embedded itself in the trunk of a nearby tree with a thud. He made a grab to retrieve it, but his companion was too quick for him, and he found himself knocked roughly off his feet as something pinned him down to the ground. He struggled to get up, but even as he did so, he saw the glint of silver and felt the gentle prick of a blade against his throat.

And then, for the first time, his assailant spoke.

"Your Commander also taught you to concentrate, Aoiketsu."

At the sound of the voice, Aoiketsu's eyes widened with disbelief and he let out an exclamation, trying in vain to make out the other man's features in the gloom.

"*H… Hyoushin-sama*?!"

"Well, so it seems that you do remember my name, at the very least." Hyoushin's voice was thick with irony, and Aoiketsu felt the blade point pulled back from his throat as the weight pinning him to the ground was removed. He scrambled into a sitting position, staring up at his companion in bewilderment as the Meihi got to his feet, the sound of him brushing down his own clothing audible in the silent forest.

"Shit, sir — are you trying to *kill* me?"

"I rather thought you were trying to kill me, actually." Hyoushin replied simply. "You seemed keen to fight, and I thought it would be as well to let you have your way. It was a good way of gauging your present state of mind… after all, you did come at me with Suzaku's holy sword."

He reached for the discarded weapon, pulling it from the tree and glancing at it in the dim moonlight before handing it back to the confused soldier.

"Things are not always what they seem. Besides, if I had wanted to kill you, you would be dead. We both know that, I think. I was simply testing you. That's all. On your resolve and your strength. There is no better way of reading a man's motives than to see him in his natural environment — in battle, I can see much more clearly exactly who you are."

There was the sound of something scraping against a tree, then a flicker of flame, and Aoiketsu was able to see his assailant clearly for the first time as Hyoushin touched a discarded tree branch to the spark of light.

“I have been looking for you.” The Meihi continued. “Though this encounter was somewhat by chance, I am not displeased by it’s occurance. Quite clearly you are in good health — which pleases me to see also.”

“I… you…” Aoiketsu stared at his commander, lost for words as he tried to understand what was going on. “You… were *testing* me? Why were you testing me? For what purpose? I don’t understand! And what if I’d have hurt you? What then? I didn’t know who you were… if I had…”

“You would not have acted with such resolution.” Hyoushin offered him a faint smile. “I told you. I wanted to see what your resolve was. To protect people in the southern village… may I ask, is Sukunami Hikari one of those you now seek to protect?”

Aoiketsu flinched, staring at his Commander in horror, and Hyoushin nodded.

“We have things we need to speak about.” He said softly. “You carry her sword, and you fight in her name. A soldier of Kutou you may be, but your motives would fox most outside observers.”

“I… I can explain.” Aoiketsu got slowly to his feet, dusting down his own clothing as he eyed his Commander hesitantly, and Hyoushin shook his head.

“You told Maichu that something was afoot in Kutou.” He said softly. “And that you acted in the Emperor’s name, even if it did not seem like that was the case. I trust you, Aoiketsu. And I trust your integrity in this matter. I raised you better than that, I think — I taught you the values you yelled at me during that fight. You as much said so… and I was glad to hear it. Whatever you think you are protecting, you still think of yourself as one of my soldiers. And that means you have not betrayed your homeland at all.”

“I want to save Kutou.” Aoiketsu said softly. “That’s all. And Hikari said she’d help me… somehow. Myoume — Toroki — she says Hikari’s the only one who can — the only hope we have. So… I… I want to protect her, sir. That’s all. But… shit, I can’t talk to you about all of this. I can’t, because it might… when you go back to Kutou, someone…”

“I am not going back to Kutou.” Hyoushin shook his head. “At least, not presently. It seems I am an unwelcome acquaintance for the time being.”

“Unwelcome…?” Aoiketsu stared, and Hyoushin nodded.

“Toroki’s prophesy has unleashed some suspicion, and I am the prime subject of those suspicions.” He said evenly. “I have been relieved of my command, and essentially exiled from Kutou.”

“*What*?” Aoiketsu’s eyes almost fell out of his head. “For… for real? Even… Kintsusei-sama thinks so?”

“I am unsure.” Hyoushin admitted. “But I have decided not to contest it — not at present, anyhow. I have come South to find you, instead. Maichu is with me — although we split up to better find you in all of this forest and mountain land. I have never been to Kounan before… and he has not visited quite so close to Chichiri’s village. Hence we were not certain of your whereabouts. When you came out into the forest, I felt that it was time to fully ascertain your mindset before we had a chance to speak. I trust in you, but I wanted to see it for myself. A lot has become uncertain. I needed to know that you were not.”

He reached over to touch the *shinken*.

“This is, after all, Suzaku’s sword.” He added. “And you aren’t yet wholly confident in wielding it. Perhaps because of that fact… because it was the property of the man slain by the Shougun.”

“Yes. It is.” Aoiketsu reddened. “Hikari sort of lent it to me. It’s true, I suppose, I’ve defected. I mean… Hikari is…”

“Seiryuu no Miko.” Hyoushin said quietly, and Aoiketsu faltered, his head jerking up sharply as he stared at his companion anew.

“Seiryuu no…?”

“Ah. So you had not worked that out yet?” Hyoushin eyed him keenly. “And yet you still protect her and seek her help?”

“She’s not Seiryuu no Miko. She’s Suzaku’s.” Aoiketsu gathered his wits. “She’s Suzaku’s Shinzahou — that’s why she promised to help.”

He bit his lip.

“Shit, I wasn’t meant to tell you that, either.” He said guiltily, and Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed.

“Suzaku’s Shinzahou is Sukunami Hikari?” He asked softly, and slowly Aoiketsu nodded.

“And yet she is a girl come from the other world… this is also true?”

“Yes. How did you…?”

“Words the girl said to me herself.” Hyoushin responded simply. “It would appear that the Gods are more intelligent than I gave them credit for. To make Suzaku no Shinzahou Seiryuu no Miko is a bold step indeed.”

“You’re serious about that.” Aoiketsu realised. “You really do think she’s Seiryuu no Miko.”

“I have no doubts that it is what she is.” Hyoushin agreed. “But this is not a good place to discuss such things.”

“True enough.” Aoiketsu acknowledged, glancing around them sheepishly as he realised the truth in his companion’s words. “In that case, come back to the village with me.”

Hyoushin hesitated for a moment, then he shook his head, and Aoiketsu was aware of a sudden clouding of his Commander’s expression.

“I think that would be unwise at present.” he said cautiously. “I am a known enemy to your present companions, and I do not wish to create disharmony. Besides, you thought at first that I was Miramu — you said that you knew he was here in Kounan. I do not know by what manner you came by that information, but it concerns me. It seems very likely that, if the man is in the South, it is me he has come here to see. And if that is true, I will not bring other people into danger.”

“To see *you*?” Aoiketsu frowned, then as realisation dawned in his blue eyes, he stared at his Commander in alarm.

“You mean… to…”

“Yes.” Hyoushin said simply. “It would appear that I am in the way.”

“That’s insane! No way would Kintsusei-sama stand for that!”

“Perhaps not.” Hyoushin leant against the trunk of the nearby tree, shrugging his shoulders. “But I do not think he has had much say in the matter. It is hard to explain so much to you in this exposed place, yet I can see nothing else for it but to disclose to you as much as I possibly can, just in case I do not have another chance. Perhaps you are already wiser to it than me in some ways — you must have spoken to Toroki about the predictions she’s made — particularly the one she made in the cave in Sairou. Maichu has intimated to me that you have discussed this topic… I would have your perception of it, please.”

“You mean about the man of a tribe betraying the East?” Aoiketsu’s brows knitted together angrily, and Hyoushin nodded.

"Yes. That precise thing."

"Well, I know it isn't you, if that's what you're asking me, sir." Aoiketsu said frankly. "Maichu and I both were sure of that, even if we weren't sure of anything else."

"That gratifies me, although I have not really doubted it." A faint smile touched Hyoushin's face, barely visible in the flickering light of the flame. "You have had far more time to observe Toroki than I. Maichu seems to think you believe her words true. This is the case?"

"Whatever Myou… Toroki has seen, it's true." Aoiketsu said slowly. "Since I've been here — and even before that — she's known things that she couldn't have known except by the powers she claims to have. So… someone will betray his Highness, Commander. That's beyond doubt. And I want to stop it from happening. So… so does Toroki — and Hikari and the others. It's sort of become obvious that to protect Kounan, Kutou has to be saved. So… in the end… I think we're fighting the same battle. Which… is why…"

He trailed off, looking sheepish, and Hyoushin rested a hand on his shoulder.

"You took it upon yourself to defect and take up with Suzaku's people." He said softly. "And yet I cannot fault you. Hikari is without doubt Seiryuu no Miko. You have succeeded in doing what everyone else has failed to do, Aoiketsu. You have located and gained the trust of the only one who may save our land from destruction. And yet things are already in motion. There is one thing you do not know — one thing that only my Emperor and I were clearly aware of, and I only by his word. There is another tribesman who serves Kintsusei-sama — as closely as do I. A man who has the Emperor's complete trust — who assisted him in claiming the throne in the first place, and who also helped shield him from harm in the early weeks and months of his reign. A man who should be beyond suspicion — which is why even I have taken this long to come to the conclusion. And yet, with things moving the way they have…"

He sighed, and Aoiketsu got the fleeting impression of his companion's weariness.

"Lord Kikei was born a member of the Hin tribe." He said softly. "He was preserved by Shoukitei when the Hin were slaughtered — he and Nakago alone survived the cleansing, but for entirely different reasons. I have long been suspicious of the manner in which Kikei ingratiated himself into Imperial favour, and now I am quite sure that his methods were base ones. Though Kintsusei-sama has always

preferred to dismiss the past in favour of the present, as a man of a persecuted tribe, I find it harder to be so dismissive. I believe Kikei may have been the one who betrayed the Hin to save his own life. And if that is the case, to protect his position and gain power… I cannot imagine there is much else he would not be capable of doing."

"Kikei-sama?!" Aoiketsu's eyes almost fell out of his head. "Are you… sure?"

"Yes. Quite sure." Hyoushin said evenly. "My dismissal came in his hand, though confirmed by the Imperial seal. The notice was sent directly to Kayu, Kikei's most advanced protégé. And although the seal did confirm the order, I find the nature of the command at odds with Kintsusei-sama's normal modus operandi. I am quite certain that Kikei is the man behind Kutou's throne — the one who is the true enemy of the East."

He spread his hands.

"The antics of the South have proven a distraction, but we have been on the wrong quest from the start." He added. "It seems that these beast Gods are schemers beyond all human perception. To force the East to ask for the help of the South seems to me a rather grandiose way of attempting peace between the two lands. But if Sukunami Hikari is truly as you say… Suzaku's Shinzahou in human form… then I will have no choice but to believe it. And that this is the path we must follow. If we have time still to do so."

Aoiketsu was silent for a moment. Then,

"Hikari will be cross, when she finds out I told you." He admitted. "Although she did say that she didn't think you were our enemy. I've never believed you were, either. In fact…"

He faltered, then,

"I half wondered if it was *me*." He admitted. "Because… I *am*… Nakago's son. Aren't I? Because Myoume… Toroki says that that's why I'm so involved with Hikari. Because of who my father was — it's in my blood to protect her, somehow. And if she *is* Seiryuu's Priestess, then… then that makes a strange sort of sense. He's dead, but I… I'm not. I'm here to finish his job."

Hyoushin's eyes narrowed, and at first he did not reply. Then, slowly, he inclined his head.

"I believe I owe you an apology on that count." He said regretfully. "If you are drawn to Seiryuu no Miko's side the way your father was… concealing this from you may have been counter-productive. But I did

not want you to grow up with the idea that you were the Shougun's offspring. Rather I wanted you to become your own person, first. It was my decision — and the Emperor abided by it. I apologise for the deception, Aoiketsu. Perhaps it was overprotective of me."

"Overprotective?" Aoiketsu eyed his companion quizzically, and Hyoushin offered a faint, rueful smile.

"Sometimes rationality does not dictate all of our judgements." He owned. "The Shougun was a powerful man, but he had darkness in him, too. I understand better than many the things he suffered and the reasons he fought the way he did. But nevertheless, Aoiketsu, I made a promise to your mother that I would see to raising you with Kutou in your heart and on your lips. And I wanted that too. For you to grow up without being shackled by the bitterness of your father. You were a shred of innocence born out of all that bloodshed. It was perhaps naive of me, but I thought if I could keep that instilled in you, perhaps it would carry forth in the quest for Kutou's peace."

Aoiketsu stared for a moment. Then he grinned, shrugging his shoulders.

"I'm not angry at you for not telling me." He said frankly. "You're right — it'd have been a lot to grow up with — a burden on my shoulders all the way. Besides, even if I was angry about that, I couldn't stay it, could I? You raised me. You trained me. You taught me — not just how to fight, but how and when not to, too. In a sense it meant you were the closest thing I had to an actual father, growing up. I've realised that all the more since I've been here and had to make decisions for myself so much. So really, considering everything… I owe you too much to be cross about one little thing."

Hyoushin's eyes widened in surprise. Then he shook his head.

"I do not deserve such a label, although I won't pretend I dislike hearing it." He said frankly. "I am not currently even your Commander, Aoiketsu. But that you will still listen to my word… there is so much that I feel we have to do and so little time to do it. I sent Maichu on an errand yesterday, and I trust he will rendezvous with me in Souun tomorrow. Or no, the first light is beginning to break on the horizon… so later today. I must return there else he will worry for my safety. That being the case, I think the best plan would be… for you to return to your Suzaku comrades and attempt to explain our coming. I do not expect them to greet us with open arms — however, I think that if Maichu and I remain in Souun, if you and any of your companions wish to speak to us, it would be a more neutral talking ground. And perhaps then negotiations could begin by

which we could find a settlement. For Kintsusei-sama's sake… I feel we must."

"All right." Aoiketsu looked doubtful. "But really, I think it would be okay if you came with me. Even if you didn't stay very long. Chichiri's not the kind of person who holds onto grudges — he doesn't even hate my father for all the things Nakago did to Kounan, and he's forgiven me for lying to him and spying on his family. And Hikari… you said you needed to speak to her. Right?"

"Yes, but it will keep till a more gracious hour, and I must not leave Maichu stranded." Hyoushin said sensibly. "I am glad at least to have made contact with you. I would like to make it back to Souun before the sun rises too far, however. Kounan is a beautiful land, but sadly the climate does not suit a Meihi's constitution."

"Really?" Aoiketsu looked surprised. "You didn't fight like Kounan's weather bothered you — or am I getting rusty?"

"No — your skill is still sharp, and you should keep it so." Hyoushin assured him. "It is not so warm by night, that is all. And I have always had a good perception of movement in the darkness. If you work on your concentration, you will become yet stronger — if you had not let your confidence distract you, perhaps you would have disarmed me this time."

He shrugged.

"It is almost daylight." He added, moving to stamp out the flickering firelight as the sky around them began to brighten with the first light of the day. "Return to your companions and pass on my message. If all is well, we will reconvene in Souun later today. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Aoiketsu nodded. "And tell Maichu that I'm glad he came south with you too, Sir. He did say that if I got into any trouble, he'd be here like a flash. I figure he decided the same thing when they tried to oust you."

"His loyalty is beyond question, just like yours." Hyoushin agreed gravely. "However, loyalty is a delicate thing. Not all of those who you call friends may remain so, if this is the path we have to take."

"I guess you mean Kayu, huh?" Aoiketsu frowned, and Hyoushin nodded.

"He owes much to Kikei." He agreed. "At present he is nothing more than a puppet. I do not believe he realises the implications of his actions — he thinks he is protecting the Emperor. But even if he came

to realise it — I do not think I could imagine he'd betray the man who put food in his mouth and provided him with shelter and education when the war left him without anything at all. As you depended on me, Aoiketsu, Kayu depended on Kikei. And in the end, it may prove a bond that is too difficult to fully break."

Aoiketsu sighed, glancing at his hands.

"Then that's how it is, isn't it?" He said at length. "I like Kayu — I won't pretend I don't. And I don't want him to be a traitor, or anything like that. But… if… if he's against the Emperor, then he's my enemy. And if he's my enemy… I… I will fight him, if I have to. That's just what it means to be Kintsusei-sama's soldier. Doesn't it?"

"Well said." Hyoushin said softly. "But the words are easier than the action… bear it in mind, Aoiketsu. If we return to Kutou, it may come to it that your resolve is tested."

"That's why you wanted to see how determined I was." Aoiketsu realised, and Hyoushin nodded.

"A moment of doubt may cost everything." He agreed. "You have always had great strength, Aoiketsu. It is now more than any time before that Kutou will need you to find it. I will be counting on you… and I am sure that you will not let me down."

Well, it was as good a time as any.

From his position in the trees high over the heads of the two Kutou soldiers, Miramu toyed idly with the string of his bow, watching absently as Aoiketsu and Hyoushin parted ways. For a moment he kicked his legs idly against the trunk of his chosen hiding place, mulling over the things he had heard.

"It seems that ghost picks up a lot more information than just the truth of my stellar identity." He reflected, a wry grin on his lips as he contemplated this thought. "Sukunami Hikari… so that explains it, then. The way she reacted in Kitora's shrine — that glowing red light, and the fact she knew Taiitsukun. Suzaku no Shinzahou… very clever, Suzaku. Hide your treasure in the heart of a young girl. Not even Kikei could imagine the genius of the treasure's hiding place. And Hyoushin's own assertions — are they true? Is this the delusion of a Meihi jumping to conclusions, or *is* it possible that this blessed prize of Suzaku is also Seiryuu's talisman? I wonder. It makes interesting thinking. And it gives me plenty of ammunition to take back to Kutou. If I want to pry information out of Kikei, I believe I have leverage to determine the true scope of his plans."

He shrugged, watching the disappearing figure of Aoiketsu as he descended back down the pathway towards the Eastern Village.

“You’re not my target, so there’s no sense in getting you involved.” He mused. “Although you are consorting with the enemy — you are a naughty boy, Aoi-kun. What would your Emperor say, if he knew the extent of your involvement with the south?”

He chuckled softly to himself.

“Not that that’s my business, either.” He acknowledged. “I’m here for quite another reason. And now I’ve found out all that Hyoushin knows… he’s no longer useful to anyone. Of all people he might seek to trust in, Aoiketsu seemed the most likely candidate to hear all of his theories and concerns. Now that he’s relieved himself of that burden, I can relieve him of another one. His life. After all, he isn’t doing anything with it, especially. And it’s nice to be paid for something I’m actually going to enjoy.”

His eyes narrowed, a hard gleam entering the indigo eyes.

“Noone messes with me, or makes threats against me and survives.” He muttered. “You know too much about me, and if you haven’t disclosed it to others yet, I’ll silence you before you do. It suits me for Kintsusei and Kikei not to know that I’m Amefuri — things may become complicated if they understood the full nature of my power and my curse. You should have kept out of my business, Hyoushin — I’ll show you what it means to cross the Shadow of the West.”

He glanced down, watching his prey as he surveyed the land, clearly working out the quickest and safest route back to Souun. Perhaps he was also scouring the area for any likely assassin hiding places, Miramu mused, amused at this ironic thought.

“Well, you can look all you like for me, but my hiding place is somewhere even your stone cold eyes can’t see me.” He murmured. “As you’re about to discover… to your detriment. I would say there’s nothing personal in it — I dislike mixing business with pleasure. But to be honest, this time I think I’d be lying.”

He hesitated for a moment, sizing up the surrounding trees as he worked out the best way to carry out his task. Then he gave a little shrug, cocking his bow in the Meihi’s direction and pausing only to gauge the angle of his shot. As he fed the distinctive, carefully sculpted arrow alongside the gut of the weapon, he allowed himself a rueful smile as he pulled the thin wire taut.

“Time for the shadow to reveal himself.” He reflected frankly. “It’s

too late, Hyoushin. This round goes to me."

With that he released his grip, watching critically as the thin barb of wood and metal shot evenly through the air, the sun glinting off it as it whistled towards its target. At the last second, Hyoushin seemed to become aware that he was under attack and he turned, but it was too late to avoid the sharp point of Miramu's poisoned weapon and it struck his left side, burrowing through the woollen fabric and deep into the pale Meihi flesh.

Hyoushin's reaction was instantaneous, as from his perch Miramu saw him wheel around, reaching his right hand up to yank the barb free from his skin. There was a glitter of icy fury in his amethyst eyes as he gazed around him, clearly looking for the source of the attack.

"Come out where I can see you, Miramu!" He exclaimed, his words carrying across the empty landscape. "Or are you a coward that hides behind his bow?"

"I'm almost impressed." Miramu dropped his shields, and for the first time the Meihi's violet eyes met the assassin's teasing blue ones. "You seem angry, Hyoushin. At last perhaps I've found the way to make you so."

"Who sent you?" Hyoushin tossed the blooded barb aside, his expression one of disgust as he glared at his assailant accusingly. "Was it Kikei? Is this his idea of cleaning up his messes? Or are you simply acting on your own dark impulses? Is this a characteristic of Byakko's people — to act always to other people's detriment?"

Despite himself, Miramu bristled at the mention of the tiger deity, and he glowered back, lowering his bow as he sat back against his branch.

"You have no idea what you are dealing with." He said coldly, a sinister edge to his western tones. "Didn't I tell you that in Kutou? You are no match for one born like me, even if I don't pay court to that overgrown housecat. I have Amefuri's power, Hyoushin. If you understand that, you should have known it was foolish to cross me."

"What have you done to the Emperor?" Hyoushin's eyes narrowed. "I'm not fool enough to believe that you had nothing to do with my removal from his service."

"Tut tut." Miramu shook his head, a mocking, cold glitter in his seiran gaze. "Why would I speak to you about that? You're an exiled traitor and divulging information to you about Kutou's honoured Emperor isn't something I can do."

“I’m no traitor, and you know it as well as I.”

“That’s not the report I’ve heard.” Miramu shook his head, his tone faintly taunting as he eyed the Meihi disparagingly. “As I hear it, you’re the one who sealed your own fate. Consorting with potential enemies in Hokkan’s mountains — even concealing secrets relating to the Shinzahou from Kintsusei-sama’s attention. Or are these simply slanders, Hyoushin? I’ve always come to believe that there is no smoke without fire.”

“The northern Meihi are noone’s business but mine.” Hyoushin said stiffly. “They have no part in my Emperor’s requirements of me and I have not betrayed him by speaking with them. On the contrary, before it was forced from my hands, I obtained the Shinzahou by my dealing with them.”

“And what about the corruption of the boys, Hyoushin? Shi Maichu left Touran not long after you, and you now hold the sword which it seems he chose to take with him. Now you’re here communing with Kaiga Aoiketsu under cover of darkness. How will you answer that claim, then? That you are not only acting in guilt yourself, but turning the Emperor’s loyal men against him with your deceptions?”

“Stop it.” Hyoushin shook his head impatiently. “You are the fool if you truly think I would turn against Kintsusei-sama. Any man of sense who has ever served under me knows that as the truth. I am a Meihi, after all. Our word is broken only by death.”

“Then you should start reviewing the promises you’ve been making, because you don’t have long left in which to honour them.” A predatorial glint entered Miramu’s dark blue eyes, and he smiled, a cold, hollow smile. “I didn’t expect you to pull the arrow so directly from the wound, and I give you credit for doing so without even the barest flinch. But it’s already too late. I take precautions, you know. That arrow was laced with a venom that has no known antidote. Your choice is simply this. Submit to me and let me kill you quickly and cleanly right here and now. Or fight me, and die slowly from the effects of the serum. There aren’t any other choices.”

Hyoushin’s expression darkened, and in that instant Miramu saw the wild, tribal rage that had instilled in Kintsusei the impulse to name his pale-skinned companion “Heart of Ice.” No glimmer of warmth or compassion glittered in the cold amethyst eyes, and Miramu eyed him keenly, taking in with interest the transformation that had overcome his foe.

“Now I see how you got your name.” He said conversationally.

“You are truly an enigma, Hyoushin. Most would fly into a hot rage and declare their desire to spill my blood. But you… no, you’re not the same. You truly do have a heart of ice beneath that pale ghost exterior of yours. And at long last I’ve seen it — the fury of a tribesman before he enters battle. This is the Hyoushin who has executed prisoners on the Emperor’s behalf, is it not? The man who sliced off an enemy’s head with one blow the first time he wielded a sword. I might almost be afraid of you — if I hadn’t already taken that possibility into consideration.”

Hyoushin’s fingers closed around his weapon, hate glittering in his amethyst eyes.

“You underestimate me, then.” He said softly. “I do not show mercy to the Emperor’s enemies. Or did I not tell you, Miramu, that your wiles and your games cannot so easily kill a Meihi?”

“You did, but I think in the end your boast will amount to nothing.” Miramu said easily. He hesitated, then hopped down from the tree, meeting the man’s gaze calmly as he did so. “They do say that pulling an arrow from a wound quickens the bleeding, you know. And Meihi you may be, but you still bleed red blood. You are, in the end, a man just like any other man. Whatever you say or do, you are no better or stronger than any of the other poor fools I have slain. Not even that bandit Jin who fought so hard for his life. You are just another victim to the Shadow of the West… and you will soon be dead.”

“It does not matter what you do.” Hyoushin said evenly. “I have time enough to kill you before your antics kill me. Your aim was poor, Miramu. If you wished to kill me, you should have aimed for my heart.”

“My aim was true.” Miramu shook his head. “It would have been no fun to strike you down so quickly, after all. I wanted to see this you, Hyoushin. This man of rage and ice that I’d heard so much about. When I threatened Kintsusei’s life, I saw a glimmer of it. But now, at last, I’ve drawn him out into plain sight. Your clothes are already soaking with blood — your left hand is slick with it, even as you clutch at your precious blade. Yet you face me as if you don’t feel the slightest hint of pain. It’s impressive, what the mind can do when faced with such a compelling distraction.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“I aimed where I hit.” He added. “Because the poison I used has paralytic qualities. And I know that if you cannot use your left arm, you cannot hurt me. You are a strong swordsman — almost legendary

within Kutou, it appears. But you are also known for not being able to fight with your right arm. And therefore you are as weak as any other trained soldier. Remove the arm from the equation and you remove the immediate threat."

Hyoushin glared at him, defiance in his expression, but even as he did so Miramu was aware of the slight faltering of his companion's grip and his grin widened as he nodded his head.

"A little longer and your arm will probably become more of a hindrance than a weapon." He said softly. "I'll give you the choice one more time, Hyoushin. The poison that now invades your system is powerful, and unlike with most herbal toxins there is nothing that can neutralise it. You will die either slowly, in fever and distress, with paralysis and delusion creeping up through your limbs and into your heart to still it. Such a death may take hours — even days to fully accomplish. I cannot imagine it to be a pleasant way to end your life."

He shrugged.

"But there is a better solution. You may submit to me, and I will take your life here and now. It will be quick, that way, if you surrender and admit to me your weakness. I will be merciful… after all, my orders are simply to remove you from the equation."

"Your orders." Hyoushin echoed flatly. "Then it *is* Kikei's will… just as I thought. He moves against the Emperor like a snake in the grass, baring his fangs for the kill in secret. And now… now he seeks to rid Kintsusei-sama of those who remain truly loyal."

"A snake… what an interesting analogy." Miramu snorted. "I might almost call it topical, considering the circumstances."

"Don't play games, Miramu! Tell me the truth." Hyoushin snapped. "What is Kikei about? What ill does he have in store for my Emperor?"

"The *truth* is that Kintsusei-sama's seal authorised your dismissal." Miramu said cruelly. "Face it, Hyoushin. Your master has abandoned you. You are nothing more than a homeless, pointless stray, now. He has no further use for you. His concerns are no longer your business. And I am here to dispatch you."

"But not on the Emperor's orders." Hyoushin was unmoved. "Because Kintsusei-sama is a man of honour — a soldier who plays fair. Even if he doubted in me, he would hear my case and judge it fairly. He would summon me and allow me to speak about things that Kikei does not want him to know. Things concerning Seiryuu no Miko, perhaps. Things concerning…"

“Sukunami Hikari.” Miramu agreed cheerfully, and a flicker of anxiety flared briefly in the Meihi’s gaze. It was gone in an instant, but Miramu had seen it, and his smile widened.

“Yes, I know about Sukunami Hikari.” He said evenly. “I heard your conversation with your boy, Hyoushin. To be honest with you, such things aren’t very important to me. Nor is the Emperor of Kutou or his wishes or otherwise. I had simply hoped to make you die doubting his fidelity — but you’re annoyingly steadfast when it comes to your faith in him.”

Hyoushin did not respond, his expression forbidding as he absorbed Miramu’s taunting words.

“Still, orders are orders.” The assassin continued evenly. “I’m being paid to take you out — even if you can’t be made to believe it was at the Emperor’s command. How I do it is really not an issue to me. I’d like to enjoy it, however. So I’ll cut a deal with you. You surrender to me, and drop your sword… and I will make it clean and swift. That benefits both of us, does it not? Since there is no other outcome… in two days or less you will be dead anyway, regardless of whether or not you fight me now. Not even Seiryuu no Miko would have the power to alter that — even if you did somehow come to speak to her.”

Hyoushin was silent for a moment, then he raised his gaze, and Miramu was struck by the cold stoniness of his amethyst eyes.

“Two days is a long time.” He said softly, his tones edged with something the assassin had not heard there before. “I have told you, Miramu. I have fought adversity and lived through it — I am not so easy to erase. There will not be a day in this world where you live and I do not. If that means I will kill you and then die myself, so be it. I am not afraid of death. I am not afraid of anything — and I am not afraid of *you*. You underestimate the strength of a Meihi’s will yet again. I can still hold my sword. And so long as I can do that, I will never surrender to anyone.”

His grip tightened on the hilt of the weapon, although Miramu’s eagle eyes noticed a first flicker of pain dart across the pale man’s brow as he drew the blade fully from its sheath.

“So now we will see what men of Byakko are truly made of.” Hyoushin continued darkly. “Arm your bow, Miramu. Draw your dagger. Let us fight as men, not as cowards hiding in the trees. If you are so much a stronger man than me, then prove it. Poison is a weak man’s weapon. I wish to see you fight.”

Miramu gazed at him for a moment, taking in the resolute coldness

in his opponent's features. Somehow the man seemed paler than ever. Or perhaps, he mused, it was simply the direct contrast of the spreading stain of red liquid that now darkened the breast of his foe's clothing. To Miramu the stitching on the fabric held no meaning, but had he but known it the spread of blood had already obscured Lirayi's neatly stitched Meihi character for 'peace'. To his expert gaze, he knew that the Meihi was losing blood swiftly, and yet he showed no outward signs of it, his stance solid as he gazed at Miramu expectantly.

"Well?" He pressed quietly. "Are you that afraid that you cannot prove your conviction to me?"

"If that's how you want it." Miramu shrugged, pulling the dagger from his belt as he twisted it deftly in his fingers. "I'm not much for contact fighting, and I've no intention of meeting your legendary blade if I can avoid it. But if you want to fight, then yes, I'll fight you. In the end it might be more fun that way. After all, vigorous action like that will only spread the poison more quickly through your body — in the end that suits me as much as anything else."

"So be it then." A look of grim determination flared in Hyoushin's cold violet gaze. "Enough talking. This will settle it once and for all."

Chapter 8

Chapter Seven

Things were getting serious.

As Aoiketsu made his way back towards the Ri farmhouse, he bit his lip, thinking over the conversation with his Commander as he slipped through the still-silent trackways of the simple mountain village. It had relieved him to see the Meihi face to face, and to know that the man bore him no ill will for their encounter in Hokkan — but something in the man's quiet words and troubled expression had also cast a chill over the pleasure of the reunion.

It had never been a game, Aoiketsu had known that from the start. And yet now, somehow more than ever, what they sought to do seemed ever more real and frightening.

"Maichu is here too, though." He reminded himself. "Later I'll speak to him. Later I'll be able to tell him everything I couldn't tell him before. Now the axe has dropped, and it's becoming clearer who our enemies are. I never suspected Kikei-sama of treason — but I trust in the Commander's word. So if he says it, that's how it is. And that means… going back to Kutou just became all the more dangerous an adventure."

As he drew closer to the big sturdy building that marked the heart of the regenerated village, he was aware of someone yelling his name, and from the front of the property a figure accosted him, hair loose and flying in the wind and the ties of her dress carelessly and hastily tied as she grabbed him firmly by the shoulders, then hugged him as if afraid she would never see him again. There was a glimmer of desperation and relief in her indigo eyes, and for a moment Aoiketsu simply stared, taken completely off guard by this sudden display of raw panic in one who was usually so calm.

"Myoume?" He asked softly, disentangling himself gently from her grasp as he held her at arm's length. "What's gotten into you? And why are you yelling like that? It's barely past dawn and… shit, are you… *crying*?"

As he registered the glitter of tears on her lashes, Myoume muttered a faint curse, reaching up to dash the liquid away.

"I'm sorry." She whispered, her usually calm tones uneven and

broken as she sought to fight her emotion. “But I was afraid… I thought… I’d sent you into…”

She faltered, struggling to compose herself, and Aoiketsu frowned, eying her keenly. The woman who stood before him had the unearthly glitter in her eyes of someone who was seeing pictures far beyond anything he could see, and from the tension in her body, he guessed that whatever had assailed her was not a pleasant sight. He sighed, shaking his head.

“Snap out of it, will you?” He begged. “I don’t know what to do with crazy women… that wasn’t ever in my training. I don’t know what’s wrong with you, but really, you’re starting to scare me. This isn’t like you — get a grip on yourself!”

At this Myoume started, as if his bluntly honest words had broken the spell, and for a moment she stared at him, as if trying to regain her bearings. Then she sighed, rubbing her temples.

“I was afraid.” She murmured. “It hasn’t taken me like that in… in ages, but… when you left… and… Miramu was…. He… I can still feel him, somewhere in the forestland surrounding this village. And you… when you’d gone… I felt the taint of blood on his fingers. I had a sudden impulse that he was… he was truly here to kill. Not to spy, not to speak… but to kill. And you’d gone off alone… Aoi, I can’t let you be killed. If you had been… if I’d been wrong…”

She faltered, and Aoiketsu rested a hand on her shoulder, shaking his head.

“You already told me I wasn’t going to die yet.” He reminded her, and Myoume shrugged.

“It’s easy for you to trust in my predictions.” She said bitterly. “I’m the one who has to make them. And more and more I’m doubting myself. Right now all that I can see and hear in my head is his naked drive to kill — that my brother whose spirit is usually so closed and cold has a bloodlust about him that’s resonating so wide he’s not able to suppress it. And when I close my eyes, I see… blood. I thought… you might not come back.”

“And Seiryuu needs me, I guess, so that’d be a bit of a problem, huh?” Aoiketsu asked. Myoume shook her head impatiently.

“Not everything that I think or feel has to be about that.” She snapped. “What about Hikari in all of this? How would she feel if I let you be killed? Give me some credit for compassion too, Aoi… I’m not just a fortune-teller who twists time to my own advantage. Maybe

sometimes I do sink lower than I should in order for things to come about in the right order, but I'm not quite as low as that. Hikari's been kind to me — from the first time she met me, she was kind to me, and she trusts me. I've pushed you two together and I know I have — I wouldn't willingly let anything happen to you now."

She sighed, eying him with undisguised relief, and Aoiketsu knew that she was not really angry.

"I'm becoming fond of you too, Aoi-kun." She added. "I'm glad you came back. Whatever errand Miramu's on, it isn't your blood that he's after. And that means I wasn't wrong after all. You came back safely… and all is well."

"Blood…" Aoiketsu faltered, his eyes widening as a sudden thought crossed his mind. "Shit… Myoume… where is he? You can sense him, can't you? Do you know exactly where he is?"

"Yes, more or less." Myoume looked surprised. "But why — Aoi, there's no sense you running after him. We don't need unnecessary heroics, you know."

"It's not unnecessary heroics." Aoiketsu said darkly, his fingers slipping to the sheathed sword at his side. "Myoume, listen. Hyoushin-sama was in the woods. He… found me, and he told me some things that Chichiri and the others really need to hear. But he said that he thought if Miramu was in Kounan that it would be him… that there was probably a contract on his life. And… you said… bloodlust…"

"Hyoushin?" Myoume's eyes widened in dismay. "In Kounan? But *why*? And why did I not…?"

"Right now isn't the time to discuss it." Aoiketsu said urgently. "Miramu's dangerous, and if the Commander is in trouble… Myoume, dammit*, tell me where Miramu is*!"

Myoume stared at him for a moment.

"In the grove beyond the willow trees." She whispered. "In a clearing not far south of this place. But Miramu isn't your average enemy, Aoi. You know that. He's dangerous."

"I know." Aoiketsu said grimly. "But that's more or less where I left the Commander — which means that right now he's in trouble and I have to help him. Whatever you think of Hyoushin-sama — I'm not going to let him be killed if I can do something to stop it. Tell Chichiri and the others where I've gone — and make sure Hikari doesn't come running after me. Okay? I'm going to go chase that damn assassin out of the mountains before he can hurt anyone else!"

Without waiting for Myoume to respond, he pulled away from her, turning on his heel and hurrying back in the direction he had come. Behind him he heard the prophet calling his name but he blanked it out, feeling an equal mix of adrenalin and fear curling inside of him as he pounded across the uneven, grassy terrain.

"*It seems very likely that, if the man is in the South, it is me he has come here to see. And if that is true, I will not bring other people into danger.*"

As if scolding him, suddenly the Meihi's own calm, reasoned words echoed in his head, and he muttered a curse under his breath that he had allowed them to be so easily parted.

"I left him alone to be targeted and I shouldn't have." He berated himself. "Hyoushin-sama's strong but he's a soldier, not a magician. And Miramu… of all people, maybe I could have talked him round. I shouldn't have abandoned him — but I'm *not* going to let him get killed!"

He brushed his fingers against the hilt of Hotohori's sword, half-wondering whether or not it was right to be contemplating taking a man's life with an Emperor's holy blade.

"I wouldn't have said it to Myoume, but if killing Miramu will save Hyoushin-sama, that's what I'm game to do." He said firmly, his resolve hardening in his heart as he remembered the faint flicker of weariness in the Meihi's amethyst eyes. "Myoume can hate me if she wants to — that'll be her concern. But if killing him is the way to stop people suffering more then I'll do it. Even if I stain Suzaku's blade with blood."

Almost as if it had heard what he had said, Aoiketsu felt a faint glimmer of something throb through the white and gold hilt and he faltered, staring down at it in disbelief.

"Do you *want* to fight?" He wondered. "Or are you telling me not to? But I can't wield Suzaku's power from this blade… can I? Surely an Emperor as gentle as the man Chichiri describes Hotohori-sama as can't want to go slaughtering people just on my whim? Or is it… shit, is it something else? Chichiri said that Hotohori-sama wounded my father with this blade — right? Did it just respond to me… because it's tasted *Nakago's* blood in the past, and has made the connection? Later, I'll ask Chichiri. So long as I'm still alive after this, I'll ask him about the sword. But right now… so long as it and me are on the same side… that's all that matters."

He pushed the thought aside, hurrying through the trees as he

made his way to the place he and his Commander had had their impromptu battle. Briefly Aoiketsu recalled the slick trickle of blood that Hyoushin's strong sword-arm had drawn from his thumb, and he bit his lip.

"That was it." He realised. "My blood on the blade… somehow… my blood is Nakago's blood. Shit, that must be it. But Nakago was… is it really going to fight on my side, or does the spirit that lives inside of it want *me* dead in his place? Oh well — it's a bit late to start worrying about that now."

He reached the clearing, pausing as he realised it was deserted, and he frowned.

"Now where?" He muttered, then, "If I was the Commander, and I was going back to a town in a land I didn't know very well, what would I do? Would I wander around hoping to find a trail or… no. I'd go to higher ground and find a clearer space. Which means… he's over the rise. And if he is, that's where Miramu is too."

He sped up his pace, darting swiftly between the thick, gnarled trunks of the trees that seen generations of southerners pass their lives in Kounan's bandit-ridden south-west. As he drew closer, he knew his impulse had been right, as clearly through the trees he heard the familiar sound of his Commander's voice. And yet, though it was clearly recognisable, there was an inflection of something else in the man's tones. For a moment Aoiketsu could not place it, and then, with a jolt, he realised it was the lilt of a Meihi accent — the same lilt that Bakaru had had in his voice when they had encountered him in the northern temple. Something about this realisation unnerved him, and he gritted his teeth, knowing that whatever happened, to hesitate now might well cost the Meihi his life.

He burst through into the clearing, horror flickering across his expression as he registered the scene before him. In the grove, beneath the shade of a spreading willow tree stood the Byakko assassin, his bow cocked as he toyed idly with a fresh arrow from his quiver. Across from him stood the Meihi, sword in hand and a look like nothing Aoiketsu had ever seen in his glittering amethyst eyes. He took a faltering step forward, then stopped, unsure how to proceed as the assassin glanced up, seeing him for the first time. For a moment, soldier and Seishi met gazes, and Aoiketsu was surprised to see a flicker of something close to regret lurking in the depths of Miramu's odd gem-like eyes.

The effect was so contrary to the assassin's scornful, sardonic character that for a moment the young soldier hesitated, uncertain

what he should do. Then, as he registered the spreading stain of blood that covered his Commander's upper half, his indecision became anger, and he took a step or two forward, pulling the *shinken* from its sheath as he prepared to engage the Seishi in combat.

"Stand down, Miramu." He yelled. "Or else you'll regret it! I mean it! Stand *down*!"

At the sound of his voice, Hyoushin turned, seemingly registering the presence of his young protégé for the first time. As he did so, Aoiketsu saw a look of alarm cross his features, then the Meihi raised his right hand, gesturing back in the direction of the village.

"Leave this place, Aoiketsu!" He exclaimed. "That is an order — return to the Eastern Village! Do not become involved in things that do not concern you — sheath your sword and let me handle my own battles. You have plenty enough of your own still to fight."

"Like hell am I letting that bastard assassin have his way." Aoiketsu's eyes narrowed and he shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir, but that's an order I'm not going to obey. He's a nutcase and he kills for the fun of it. I won't do it. Soldiers don't turn their backs on their Commanders, after all. If he wants to fight you, he'll have to fight me too."

"You are such a foolish boy." Miramu sighed, shaking his head in frustration as he sent Aoiketsu a reproachful look. "Why do you think I waited for you to leave before I dropped down from the trees? I had no intention to hurt you, and yet here you are, running back into my line of fire like a foolish rabbit baiting a fox. Do you want to die, Aoiketsu? Is that really what you wish for, to drop like a stone on Kounan's land?"

"I don't like people who attack my Commander." Aoiketsu said grimly.

"But Hyoushin's not your Commander any more, Aoi-kun." Miramu said reasonably, twirling his arrow between his fingers as he cocked his head on one side. "He's been ousted."

"Hyoushin-sama's my Commander until my Emperor tells me otherwise." Aoiketsu said simply. "I've had no orders from Kutou and as far as I'm concerned, nothing has changed. And that being the case, it's my duty to defend him. Whatever you think about it."

Miramu frowned, shaking his head in irritation. Then he faded and vanished from view, re-materialising in the trees above the soldiers's heads.

“This is inconvenient.” He said frankly. “I don’t like breaking my word. But here’s my dilemma. I promised that I would come to Kounan and that I would take Hyoushin’s life. And I also promised that I would not kill Seiryuu’s boy when I came here. So now what would you have me do? Whatever happens, I stand to break my word. And I do hate inconsistency… it’s not my style to be sloppy.”

“Seiryuu’s boy?” Aoiketsu’s eyes narrowed. “Stop playing with me. Kikei sent you to attack Hyoushin-sama, didn’t he? Because he wants the Commander out of his way. If he doesn’t want me dead — why not? What does he think he can use me for? Because I’m not easy to manipulate and I’m not going to abandon Hyoushin-sama so easily.”

“He doesn’t want you for anything at all, as it happens.” Miramu said glibly. “He was quite willing to dispatch you also. It was me who decided against it, Aoi. I told you. I rather like you. I really don’t want to kill you at all.”

“Aoiketsu, stop being reckless and get back.” Hyoushin took a hand now, and as the Meihi pushed himself forcibly between the assassin and his charge, Aoiketsu was vaguely aware of the heaviness of his Commander’s breathing. “I told you. Go back to the village. You are no use to Seiryuu no Miko if you are killed here. I don’t need your help… you are being foolish and I will not allow it.”

“You’re hurt.” Aoiketsu protested. “You’re bleeding, sir, and there’s a lot of it! You were the one who taught me not to abandon a wounded comrade — do you expect me to go against that now?”

“I also taught you to obey orders.” Hyoushin said flatly. “I told you. Go. It will be well. Go. I do not need you here.”

“He doesn’t want you to see him die, Aoi.” Miramu reflected, a faint flicker of amusement in his expression. “Isn’t that touching? He seeks to spare you the trauma of his final defeat and to protect your life, all in one sweeping, self-sacrificing gesture. I would not have expected less from a man of his calibre, however. Throwing himself into danger on others’ behalf seems to be something of a habit of his, after all. You should follow his advice… your life is worth something still, whereas his has no purpose whatsoever. And no matter how hard you fight me — I will still kill him. Remember, Aoi-kun, that I cannot be killed.”

“*Nobody* is going to be killed.”

At that moment a fresh voice interrupted the conversation, and Aoiketsu turned around, seeing Myoume standing in the clearing, a troubled yet resolute look on her clever features. Her thick white hair

was loose and wild around her face, teased by the gentle morning breeze, and the unearthly glint was back in her seiran eyes as she surveyed the scene that had begun to play itself out in the normally peaceful Kounan countryside. In that instant, Aoiketsu understood better than he ever had before the battle that his Western ally had been forced to fight with herself since the day Miramu had left the village.

At the sight of her, Miramu lowered his bow, a look of complete anguish crossing his face.

“Myoume.” He murmured, and Myoume raised her head as the two pairs of identical indigo eyes locked gazes for a moment.

“Stop this, Oniichan.” She said softly, and at the use of the familial nickname, Miramu’s expression became even more distressed, the arrow slipping from his fingers as it fell forgotten to the ground below. Slowly he shook his head, and Aoiketsu could see the glitter of tears once more in Myoume’s expressive eyes.

“Stop this.” She repeated. “Nobody is going to die. Aoi’s right. You shouldn’t be here. And I won’t let you hurt anyone else.”

At this, Miramu seemed to jerk out of his daze and he bit his lip, his gaze flitting briefly towards the defiant, bloodstained Hyoushin. Then he sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

“It’s already too late to say that.” He said simply. “Even *you* can’t undo what’s already been done, Toroki.”

With that he closed his eyes, fading from view completely, and as he did so, Myoume let out a heavy, shuddering sigh.

“He’s gone.” She whispered. “It’s all right, Aoi — you can put the *shinken* away. Miramu’s gone.”

At the sound of her words, Hyoushin’s footing seemed to fail him and he stumbled to his knees, the distinctive, left-handed blade slipping dropping from his grip as he put out his hands to steady himself. As Aoiketsu watched in horror, his left arm buckled beneath him, and the young soldier darted forward, discarding the blessed sword as he focused on breaking his Commander’s headlong fall..

“Hyoushin-sama!” He exclaimed. “Shit, you’re really bleeding… what the hell did he do to you?”

Hyoushin swallowed hard, a flicker of pain crossing his expression. Then, slowly, he shook his head.

“Commander?” Aoiketsu murmured, and Hyoushin swallowed

again. Then he took a deep breath into his lungs.

“Poison.” He whispered faintly.

“Poison?” Aoiketsu’s eyes became wide with alarm, and he let out an exclamation as the wounded man slumped against him, unconscious. “Shit… Hyoushin-sama… what has that bastard *done*?”

“We have to stop the bleeding.” Myoume was by his side in a moment, concern in her blue eyes as she knelt down next to the two Easterners. “Lay him on the ground, Aoi. We need to stem it… he’s already lost a lot, and if we don’t, he’ll bleed out and die.”

“The… bleeding?” Aoiketsu stared at her, swallowing hard as for the first time he fully registered the presence of the thick, congealing red liquid that stained his Commander’s upper half. He bit his lip, fighting against the sudden sense of nausea that threatened to well up inside him, and Myoume shot him a sharp look.

“You didn’t notice?” She demanded, and Aoiketsu shook his head.

“I did but I… I didn’t.” He whispered. “Like I was thinking… about something else… shit, Myoume, I… I can’t…”

“Pull yourself together, or he’s going to die.” Myoume snapped, forcibly grabbing Hyoushin by the shoulders and laying him out on the grass as she struggled to unlace the ties of his thick woollen clothing. “You can be squeamish later — you can vomit and faint all you like when we get back to the village. But right now, if you care at all about saving this man’s life, swallow it and be a man, okay? Grab onto whatever it was that made you immune to it when you first wielded that blade in Miramu’s face. Otherwise we’ll lose him.”

Aoiketsu stared at her for a moment, stricken. Then he set his teeth, resolutely nodding his head.

“I will.” He said frankly. “At least… I’ll try, Myoume. I can’t guarantee… but I… I’ll try.”

“That’s the spirit.” Myoume sounded relieved, and somewhere in the haze of his queasiness, Aoiketsu realised that despite all she had said about Hyoushin, the prophet was genuinely worried. He frowned, remembering the hoarsely gasped word that Hyoushin had managed before he had lost his grip on his consciousness.

“He said he was poisoned, Myoume.” He said softly. “I don’t know what by — but is that what Miramu meant? When he said it was too late… is that what he meant?”

“Poison…” Myoume faltered for an instant, then she seemed to

gather her wits, shaking her head. “Right now we can’t focus on that. Poison or otherwise, Aoi, this man will die if we don’t stop his bleeding. Look. He’s wrenched the barb right out of there. He’s likely left a gaping wound in his side — we need to stop it before he loses more blood than he can survive.”

Aoiketsu swallowed the rising bile in his throat as the Seishi finally managed to unlace Hyoushin’s upper garments, laying bare his pale, blood-soaked skin as she ran her fingers gently along the side of the wound. She bit her lip, tut-tutting under her breath at the still oozing blood, and Aoiketsu knew it wasn’t good.

“He really has torn through something.” She whispered. “Aoi, I’m going to need your strength alongside my own. It’s going to take some force to tourniquet this wound… it’s still gushing blood even though it should have begun to stop by now. Either he damaged something important, or whatever toxin Miramu flung into his system is making him bleed more… either way, we have to end this.”

She closed her eyes, a look of frustration crossing her features.

“I’ve been so stupid.” She whispered, clear reproach in her tones. “I’m truly so stupid, Aoi. You *told* me that Hyoushin was loyal to Kintsusei, and that they both sought peace for Kutou. Why didn’t I *listen* to you? I’ve been so wrong… and now…”

“You said yourself that this isn’t the time.” Aoiketsu said thickly. “If you want me to help, Myoume, you better tell me what to do fast, before I lose my grip. I mightn’t have registered the blood properly when I came onto the scene, but my brain’s well aware of it now. And I don’t know how long I can fight against it — so please, let’s just do whatever you need me to do.”

“Lift him up a little, would you? I need to get to the back of his shirt.” Myoume instructed, and Aoiketsu nodded, slipping his hands beneath the man’s torso as he did as he was bidden. As Myoume removed the last of the shirt, the young soldier let out a gasp, his eyes widening as he registered the deep, scarring weal marks on his commander’s back, a legacy of a master’s whip.

“Hyoushin-sama…” he murmured. Myoume cast him a quizzical look, and Aoiketsu looked troubled.

“I knew he was a slave, but I never understood…” He trailed off, and slowly, Myoume nodded.

“I saw it as his motive, but I’ve been wrong.” She said darkly. “He’s suffered so much, I thought that he must be like that Hin we’ve

spoken about so much of late — the one who butchered his way through the nobility of Kutou on his twisted path to power. That he'd want revenge against his Emperor… but I'm wrong. Hyoushin's loyalty to Kintsusei is strong… even despite these scars. I've underestimated him — the man he is. Now I understand… but is it too late to matter?"

"*That Hin* happens to be my father." Aoiketsu said stiffly, a slight edge to his voice. "I could allow *Reizeitei-sama* to criticise him, but *you've* no grounds to do so. Nakago never did anything to hurt you. And even Chichiri says he wasn't evil — even though they were enemies. You've no right to judge the things he did — you probably don't even know all the things that drove him to take those steps."

"I suppose I deserve that." Myoume eyed him ruefully, as she gestured for him to lay the stricken man back down. "That the son would defend the father, just as the sister tries to defend the brother. Family ties bind… I'm sorry, Aoi. You're right. I didn't know him, and I have no personal axe to grind against Kutou's legendary blond haired Shougun. I didn't realise you'd developed such a bond with his memory of late — but you're right. I retract my comment. It's hearsay and it's off the point."

"I've learnt some new things about him. That's all." Aoiketsu said simply. "And I'm not ashamed to be his son. I *don't* think he was a monster… not any more."

"Then perhaps he wasn't." Myoume sighed, shaking her head. "It seems my judgement might be off on several levels of late, anyway."

She rested a hand against the patient's still form, eying Hyoushin's pale, scarred skin pensively.

"I'm starting to understand things from your side." She admitted. "That this man is Kintsusei's ally — the only one in whom he truly trusts. And therefore he's a precious individual — someone who might make Kutou's Emperor listen before it's too late to save anyone or anything. I think we need him, Aoi — I should have listened to you from the start."

"Maybe." Aoiketsu admitted. "But right now there doesn't seem a point fretting over it."

"There's still a fragment of metal buried in here." Myoume reported, as she examined the wound more closely. "I think I can get it loose with my fingernails — no doubt it's a part of Miramu's design in order to make sure the poison flows freely into the body of his target. But it might gush out again, if I pull it too quickly. I'm going to use his clothing as the tourniquet — but I'll need you to hold it tight

while I do the removing. I only have two hands, so stay with me, all right? Your Commander's life depends on it."

"I understand." Aoiketsu murmured, closing his eyes briefly against a sudden wave of giddiness as he visualised Myoume's graphic description. "At least, providing we can find the antidote for the poison…"

Myoume sighed, spreading her hands as she looped the torn shirt around the unconscious man's body.

"Are you going to manage this all right?" She asked. "Because I want to move the arrow head now. If he begins to bleed more heavily, it won't matter how much poison Miramu used. We'll lose him much faster. I'm relying on you, Aoi… can you do it?"

Aoiketsu glanced at the commander's already seeping wound, and an incredible urge to be sick washed over him. Panic rushed through his senses, but he got a grip on it, forcing the sensations back.

"I'll do it." He said thickly, taking the proffered fabric in his hands as he pulled the two ends tight. "Even if I feel like this… I won't let Hyoushin-sama die. Myoume, you know that whatever I do for Kounan, I haven't turned against Kutou or the people I care about there. That I love Hikari is true enough, and I stopped spying for the East against her. But I think it's as much the prophesy the two of you share that's made me make the choices I have. Hyoushin-sama… he trained me, but it was more than that. No matter how much we talk about Nakago — even though I have his blood, he's still a stranger to me. A name of someone I can never meet or assess for myself. The truth is that I never had an actual father, just an Emperor and a Commander. But… to me, they've been family. Especially Hyoushin-sama — he's raised me since I was five and I've always looked up to and trusted in him because of that. I… I won't let him die if I can do something to help him live. No matter how much blood comes. I *won't* let you down."

Myoume smiled sadly.

"You really are getting stronger, if you can say such things." She said softly, fixing her grip carefully around the arrow. "Being a true hero isn't about charging into battle, Aoi. It's about facing your worst fears and overcoming them for the sake of someone else."

Aoiketsu nodded grimly, beyond speech as he prepared himself for the removal of the arrow head.

Myoume's fingers were deft and experienced, as if she had done

such things before, and as Aoiketsu watched her in a detached kind of daze, he realised that there was every possibility that she had.

He voiced the question burning on his tongue.

“Have you ever… has anyone ever survived?” He asked falteringly. “When your brother…”

He trailed off, and Myoume bit her lip.

“I wouldn’t know the answer.” She admitted. “Miramu and I have been strangers. I don’t know how his victims have fared.”

“But you do that like you’ve done it before.”

“So I have, but my mother and father work as Chichiri does — as apothecary in the village I grew up in.” Myoume offered him a rueful glance. “I saw my Dad remove shrapnel and blade tips before. He taught me a little, too — when my head was clear enough to absorb what he was telling me. He had implements, of course — I only have my nails. But this is the best I can do.”

“I know he’s your brother, Myoume, but right now I want to kill Miramu more than I’ve ever wanted to kill anyone in my life.” Aoiketsu admitted darkly. “Blood or no blood… for doing this…”

He faltered, beyond words, and Myoume sighed.

“I know you do.” She admitted. “And I can’t blame you for feeling that way. But… I think… my telling him that he might be an instrument of my death when we were children might have tipped him over the edge. I wish I’d kept quiet — he’d already suffered enough — but I was young and I spoke before I thought. His mind is damaged, Aoi. Damaged by pain of the past… in a way that I don’t know how to heal.”

“*Hyoushin-sama* suffered in the past, too. You said so yourself.” Aoiketsu said flatly. “But *he* hasn’t turned against anyone because of it.”

“I’m realising that.” Myoume agreed sadly. “Now. But different people are different. Hold it tight, Aoi. I’m about to pull this out of here and I don’t want there to be a rush of blood when I do.”

“A *rush* of…” Aoiketsu’s mind was jerked roughly back onto the matter at hand and he swallowed, then nodded his head. “R… right. Okay. I’m ready. Just do it.”

Myoume cast him a quizzical look, but she said nothing, focusing all of her attention on removing the offending arrow tip from the

Meihi's pale flesh. At first it seemed to catch against his skin, and Aoiketsu fought tooth and nail against the waves of dizziness that threatened to engulf him as his companion carefully eased the fragment of the weapon from its resting place. As she did so, fresh blood began to bubble from the wound, and he swallowed hard as the world swam before his gaze.

"Aoi! Tighter… now!" Myoume exclaimed, and Aoiketsu forced the lure of unconsciousness away, gritting his teeth as he obediently drew his hands across one another, stemming the flow of blood as his companion tore another strip from the soldier's shirt. She pulled her gourd from her belt, tipping some of the water onto the fabric, then pressing it gently to the wound.

"It's nothing but stream water, but it's all I have." She murmured sadly. "If we could get him back to the village, I'd be more certain of his chances. I don't think we can move him alone, though. And I don't like to leave him here alone, either. I'm not sure that, even if we both focused our energy, we could summon Suzaku's sorcerer. We just don't have the same connection to him as one of his brethren would."

She glanced at the patient, then,

"The bleeding *is* stopping, at least." She added. "But it's hot and dry out here. He needs proper care — and I can't even explain how frightened I am by the thought he might die. That I might have messed up so badly, when I thought I knew so many things."

"I'm frightened too." Aoiketsu admitted. "But not for that reason."

"All right. I think you can let go… I'll bind the wound up and then we'll think again." Myoume instructed, and with a measure of relief, Aoiketsu released his grip, sitting back on his heels as fresh nausea assailed him. Now the pressure was off, the bile rose in his throat and he bit his lip, swallowing hard.

"Myoume, if I pass out, will you promise not to tell Shishi?" He whispered, and Myoume glanced at him, then offered him a faint smile.

"You've helped a lot, even though it must've been rough on you." She said gently. "It's all right. I don't need you to do anything else right now. If you want to take a walk and clear your head, it's okay."

She scooped up the gourd, holding it out.

"Drink some of this. It might help." She added. Aoiketsu glanced at it, then shook his head.

“I think I might be sick, if I try.” He murmured. “I might be… anyway. But I will walk… if you don’t mind.”

He stumbled to his feet, casting Hyoushin a final, troubled glance before retreating a safe distance from the blood and gore of the emergency scene. As the adrenalin rushed out of him, he sank to the grass in the copse beyond, his vision swirling as he contemplated the severity of his commander’s condition.

“I wish we could send a message to Kutou. To Kintsusei-sama.” He murmured. “But we can’t. If Kikei-sama really is… then the game we’re playing… I can’t imagine the Emperor would ever order Hyoushin-sama dead. But that this could happen… we’re all in danger. All of us. Till this is over, nobody is safe.”

His eyes widened as something suddenly occurred to him.

“Miramu didn’t confirm it for sure, but he didn’t *deny* that his orders came from that man. And the pieces do add together — it was *Kikei-sama* who first brought him into our mission.” He whispered. “It must be it… that’s how Toroki’s prophesy is going to come true. He’s the missing link in the chain, just like the Commander said. But what I don’t understand is what could the man gain from it? He’s Kintsusei-sama’s trusted ally and he has a hell of a lot of power — what benefit could betraying him have to anyone? Killing Kintsusei-sama would send Kutou into total anarchy — dammit, is that what he *really* wants?”

He frowned, as at length his willpower gave out and his sickness overwhelmed him. As he sat back, still shaking from the violence of his reaction, he felt a gentle hand on his arm and he turned, glancing up at Myoume with a question in his eyes.

“Are you well enough to walk?” She asked him gently, and Aoiketsu brushed his hand across his mouth, nodding his head.

“I guess so.” He answered, although he was not certain that his words were the truth. “Why? What do you want me to do?”

“Go back to the village and get Chichiri. As quickly as you can, tell him what’s happened.” Myoume said quietly. “He can use his magic to bring the man back to the farm and hopefully safety. I will stay with him incase Miramu comes back — I don’t think that my brother will attack again while I’m here. So it falls to you to get help, Aoi-kun — are you able to do that?”

Aoiketsu hesitated for a moment, then struggled to his feet.

“I’ll go.” He agreed thickly. “I’ll get Chichiri. Don’t worry, Myoume.

Just make sure Hyoushin-sama doesn't die."

Damn.

In the shadows of Kahou's backstreets, Miramu huddled between the walls of two stone-fronted buildings, displeasure and annoyance mingled in his clever indigo eyes. As he ran over the confrontation in his mind, a rush of anger flooded through him and he clenched his fists, banging them down hard against the cool cobbles beneath his feet.

"*Dammit*!" He exclaimed, sending two scavenging rats scampering for shelter at the sudden noise as he glared at his now blooded fists. That the sharp stones had scraped his skin raw gave him little comfort, and he repeated the action, letting the burst of rage take over his body as he sought to drown the other feelings in his fury.

As he sat there, breathing heavily, he flexed his hands, watching the thin trickle of his blood run onto the cobblestones below. They hurt, but not enough to drive away the real pain that simmered inside of him, and he closed his eyes, trying to force away the image of his sister's reproachful face.

That she had been there was bad enough, and that he had been engrossed enough in his confrontation with the Meihi to let his guard down had made it even worse, but the killer blow had been the way she had called him brother.

"Even after everything." He whispered, feeling the unfamiliar sensation of tears dampening his lashes as he struggled to keep his feelings in check. "Even there, seeing me in the midst of slaying someone… she still manages to call me Oniichan. Even though I have told her I'm no longer that… even though I've cut myself off from her and forced her to accept my absence. She still… feels that tie. She still… I am still… her brother."

He groaned, burying his head in his hands as he fought with his emotions. He had travelled light, he realised, fumbling at his belt for the pouch of Ma Huang that normally hung there. He had left without acquiring additional supplies of the drug from the black market that thrived in Kutou's uncertain alleyways, and as a result there was barely enough of the herb left to take even the edge off his anguish. He slipped it between his teeth anyway, chewing the stem as the bitter taste of the weed began to spread across his tongue.

He sat back against the wall, trying his best to detach himself from the situation as he watched the rats re-emerge cautiously from their

hiding place, their need for food greater than their appreciation of danger. Something about their twitched noses and beady, black eyes sent a chill through Miramu's body as for an instant he imagined that even they were reprimanding him, eying him disdainfully for the way in which he had botched his mission. He grasped the dagger from his belt, and before he knew what he had done he had tossed it in the rats' direction. There was a tremendous squeal as the blade skewered the nearest animal, sending the second haring back into hiding as fast as his small furry legs could carry him.

Despite himself, Miramu smiled hollowly, getting to his feet as he retrieved his blade. With a shake, he discarded the rat's bloody body, eying the redness that now stained the weapon.

"Bitter herbs and blooded blade." He murmured. "That seems to sum up my life, doesn't it? And I only fall deeper into this hole Byakko dug for me twenty four years ago. There's no salvation for one who'll dirty his weapon to kill a rat just because it happened to look at him. Or is it simply because I couldn't fire that dart into Hyoushin's chest? But with Myoume there… what else could I do but retreat?"

He sighed, wiping the blade clean as he returned it to its hidden sheath.

"Still, as far as things go, my job is done." He murmured, pushing the stem of Ma Huang against his teeth as he felt the buzz of the herb's allure tingle at the edge of his senses. "Hyoushin is a dead man, even if I didn't manage to finish the job with my usual classic ease. I *did* take special care in choosing my weapon, after all — back in Kutou, where everything seemed so rational and clean. Herbs are fine, but often there are other herbs to counter them — I learnt enough about that when I was still at home, after all."

He sighed, shaking his head as childhood memories threatened to well up inside of him.

"I was wise, in the end, to use a paralytic snake venom instead of more traditional weeds." He decided, forcing the bittersweet nostalgia back into the recesses of his mind. "Even if it *was* more trouble to snare a beast from the borderlands and strip it of the poison manually — it seems that extra effort will not go to waste. After all, a good apothecary would neutralise a herbal toxin, and Aoiketsu is here — he is in the company of Suzaku's Chichiri, and such a thing would be child's play for him to remedy. A snake-bite, on the other hand… that isn't so easy. Especially this particular snake — I don't believe it even hunts in the hot and humid south, so chances are noone in Kounan's ever even seen one, let alone discerned what it can do. Thank

goodness I had a moment of wisdom in all of this. It wasn't professional — but I can go back to Kutou and tell Kikei I got the job done."

He grimaced ruefully.

"Going back to Kutou seems the best idea." He admitted to himself. "I don't seem to have even the vaguest grip on my senses anywhere else in this wretched world. Kutou is cold and full of plotting, treachery and betrayal, so quite the kind of place a creature like me belongs. I won't come to Kounan again — not so long as my sister makes her base here. I won't face her again… no matter how much gold Kikei waves in my direction. Even the information I gathered here wasn't worth this… next time he can find some other puppet to send in my place."

He glanced at his hands.

"More blood on your conscience, Byakko." He murmured. "I wonder if you're satisfied, now you see what you've made me become. Will you finally realise your stupidity and let me die? Or are you just going to continue to punish me by forcing me to keep doing this, over and over again? Maybe if Kikei does destroy this world, perhaps then I'll be able to find some peace. Maybe then you'll finally realise what a stupid cat you are… in expecting a man like me to do your Seishi bidding!"

Chapter 9

Chapter Eight

It was dark, and cold, the snow whirling around him in a dancing, dizzy dervish as he struggled to make it to the top of the mountain. Below him, on the ledges of black rock flew the imperial standard of Kintsusei, Emperor of Kutou, and as Maichu hesitated, he saw someone lift a flaming branch to the edges of the neatly woven fabric, setting the banner alight with a triumphant yell of victory.

For a moment he stared transfixed at the writhing, twisting image of the dragon cloaked in thick acrid smoke that rose higher and higher into the ice-blue sky. Then, from somewhere in the distance, he heard someone calling him, and he started, struggling to make out the speaker's words.

"Get up already, will you?"

The voice echoed through his thoughts again, and with a jolt Maichu realised that the world of snow and fire was fading as he began to wake from his uneasy dream. He opened his eyes, shielding them from the sudden glare of bright sunlight that slipped in through the slits in the cramped cell's only window. As he brought the room into focus, he realised that the speaker was the young bandit girl, and she was glaring at him impatiently.

He frowned, struggling into a sitting position as he stared at her quizzically.

"Shit, you sleep like the dead." The girl — whose name was Shishi, Maichu remembered — sent him a disparaging look, shaking her head as she leant back against the dusty stone wall. "Don't you have dawn drills and stuff back in Kutou? Yeesh — for a while there I thought I wasn't going to wake you."

"It's been a rough couple of days." Maichu was alert now, irritation flickering in his dark eyes, yet deep down he knew that he was grateful to her for bringing him out of such a troubled sleep. "What do you want, anyway? I told you I wasn't going to say anything to you or your father until I'd seen Aoi. I'm trained to deal with being a captive, you know — I'm a proper soldier, not just someone who waves around a sword. You can't intimidate me with scare tactics, no matter how much training you've had."

"Will you shut your mouth?" Shishi snapped, and Maichu stared at

her, bewildered as she cast a furtive glance towards the door. For a moment she didn't speak, then she sighed.

"Damn, your voice carries." She said resignedly. "And whatever the hell that accent is, it ain't local so it stands out a mile. If you're really so well trained, try actin' a little more discreet about it, huh?"

"I can yell if I want to." Despite himself, Maichu was indignant at taking orders from this young bandit girl. "It's your problem if people hear us, not mine. You and your father forced me here. If you think that me yelling might help me get out of here, well, that's your bad deal. Not mine. And besides…"

Before he could finish his sentence, however, a rough hand was clamped around his mouth and Shishi shook her head violently, red hair flying loose in all directions as she sent him an admonishing glare.

"I said shut up, already!" She hissed. "Or do you want to stay on this friggin' mountain all mornin' long?"

Maichu's eyes widened with surprise at her question, and Shishi frowned, her brows knitting together.

"I'm not letting go until you promise you won't talk so damn loud." She said softly. "Nod if you agree… but I'll be holding you to it, on whatever honour you Kutou people believe in. It's important — all right? I need you to listen to me."

Maichu faltered for a moment, then, slowly, he nodded his head, and as quickly as it had come, Shishi removed her hand from his mouth. She wiped it absently on her shirt, letting out another heavy sigh.

"You're going to get us both into shit at this rate." She said reprovingly. "Shut up and listen. Kashira and the others aren't around. Kashira left the mountain first thing this morning because someone from Kaou-zan was tryin' to sneak up the pass in the night an' he had to go remind them why it is they're shit scared of us. Aniue went with him, but they'll be back soon. Okaa-san is sleepin'. If you want to leave, now's the time to go."

"But… you're… letting me… out?" Maichu stared at her, uncomprehending, and Shishi shrugged.

"Sort of." She admitted. "I mean, I'm coming with you — so I guess it's not quite the same. But this is the thing. You want to speak to Aoi, don't you? And I know where he is. I can take you there — and that's what I'm going to do."

“But… why?” Maichu frowned, eying her suspiciously. “Is this a trap? What’s in it for you to go behind your father’s back and help me?”

Shishi was silent for a moment, then she sighed once more.

“Aoi trusts you.” She said at length. “I know that he does… he’s said it more than once before. Papa… Kashira, he doesn’t really know Aoi — he hasn’t travelled with him, whereas I have. And sure, the guy’s an idiot an’ he thought he could spy on Kounan… but even despite that, I’m pretty sure I can trust in his judgement. Myoume believes in him too, an’ so does Hiki — that’s good enough for me. So if you’re someone Aoi has faith in… I believe you when you say you ain’t here to cause us harm.”

Maichu eyed her thoughtfully for a moment.

“Don’t tell me that Aoi’s pretty-boy looks have finally paid off for him.” He said frankly. “You almost sound like you’re sweet on the guy… I didn’t think he had it in him.”

“Shut your face.” Shishi brought her hand sharply down against his cheek, eying him scornfully. “I’m a bandit. I don’t have time for that kind of shit. Or didn’t you understand that yet? This is Kashira’s roost. I’m his daughter. One day I’m goin’ to be strong as he is an’ lead the bandits on Reikaku-zan as well as he does. Do you think I’d do that by goin’ soppy over some reject from Kutou’s army? Get real, will you? No way. I ain’t ever goin’ to fuss about bein’ some man’s trinket.”

“All right… then why do you believe in him so much?” Maichu asked her quizzically, touching his cheek ruefully as he did so. “Because I can’t see as why you’d suddenly trust someone who’s a spy for Kutou to work for Kounan. Aoi’s Eastern, you know. Just like me. We ain’t here to save Kounan — either one of us.”

“Aoi’s here to save *everything*.” Shishi said soberly, and Maichu frowned, noting the sudden clouding of her expression. “He understands what we all know — that’s all. This world is goin’ to blow itself to pieces, pretty much, unless someone does somethin’ about it. Myoume’s said more than once that Aoi’s a part of this — an ally that we can trust. An’ I agree with her. He’s fought an’ killed in Kounan’s name already, you know.”

“*Aoi*… killed someone?” Maichu’s expression became one of shock, and Shishi nodded.

“Yes.” She said matter-of-factly. “Now do you understand? This is a big deal. Are you goin’ to come with me, or not? He’ll tell you the

same thing I have… except I figure you'll take it better from him. An' more, you'll tell him things that we need to know, too. So the quicker you do that, the quicker we know what we're fightin' against. You said you had things you wanted to say t'him — an' we don't have the luxury of waitin' around. Not when Kutou already have three Shinzahou in their possession."

Maichu frowned, weighing up his companion's words. Then he got to his feet slowly, nodding his head.

"I'll come with you." He said quietly. "But I don't pretend I understand all of what you just threw at me. I understand this though…I'm for Kutou. So is Aoi. An' what matters to me is saving the East from destruction. That's what I've always intended to do — I joined the army because of that, an' I want to see it through. But I trust Aoi. He's my closest friend — has been for six years — an' I'd trust him with my life. If *he* says to trust you all, I'll tell you what I know an' leave nothin' out. But I'll speak to him first. I can't do anythin' else… I have to speak to him."

"Then that's why we're going to the village." Shishi said categorically. "Come on. Follow me. I know a short cut out of here. We'll bypass Papa's sentries an' get into the open woodland easier that way."

"All right." Maichu nodded. "I guess I don't have a lot of choice in the matter."

"Nope." Shishi agreed. "At last, you're showin' some smarts. There's hope for you yet — come on."

"What about my sword?"

"Do you think I'm crazy?" Shishi snorted. "Givin' a prisoner back his weapon so he can fight me for his freedom? No way. Besides, Papa has that. I ain't goin' trespassin' round his chambers tryin' to dig up your lost property. You shouldn't have been dumb enough to lose it in the first place. Papa's Papa but he's still Kashira an' there are still rules. I'm breakin' enough of them by helpin' you outta here… ain't that enough?"

"All right, I suppose it is." Maichu eyed her keenly. "But I still don't see how we're going to…"

He trailed off, watching as his companion drew her sword slowly from her belt, glancing at it then placing it gently against the back wall of the cell.

"Do-nee, wake up, will you?" She murmured. "Let's give it a shot,

huh? Create a little detour into the southern passages. Enough people already saw me come down this way — if I go back out with this guy in tow, I'll have them on my tail before we can get out of here."

"Who are you talkin' too?" Maichu was confused, but Shishi didn't answer. Instead she closed her eyes, a look of concentration and determination crossing her young features as the very tip of her rough-edged weapon began to glitter with a sheen of silver light. Maichu whispered a curse, taking a step away from his companion as very slowly a crack began to form in the back wall. At first it was just a hairline but, as Shishi pushed her sword into it, it widened until there was enough space for two slim figures to slip through.

She sighed, lowering her sword, and for the briefest instant Maichu saw a weary flicker in her bronze eyes. Then it was gone, and she was eying him impatiently.

"Well?" She demanded. "Aoi said he called you 'dancing spider' because you can get in and out of places other people don't usually try. So prove it — okay? Get moving. I'll be right behind you."

"What the hell kind of witchcraft was that?" Maichu demanded, but Shishi shook her head.

"Ever mention that to anyone and I'll brain you." She said succinctly. "Just move, will you? Kashira'll be back soon, an' first thing he'll want to do is ask you some questions about Kutou."

"Okay, already, I'm going." Maichu groaned, but obediently slipped into the newly formed crevasse, turning to glance at her as he did so. "But shit, Shishi — you keep some weird people on this mountain."

"Shishi?" Shishi faltered, staring at him, and Maichu frowned.

"That's your name, ain't it?" He demanded, and Shishi nodded.

"Yeah — but why are *you* usin' it?"

"Your Pa called you it enough yesterday, an' I ain't stupid, you know. I have ears."

"Ears, yeah — I hadn't bet on a brain, but I guess looks can be deceptive." Was Shishi's crushing rejoinder. "Don't think you get brownie points because you remembered, though — just get a move on. Keep goin' left an' then to the right when you reach the fork. Then we'll be out in the valley… an' from there the village is just a short walk."

"And you're not worried about taking one of Kutou's soldiers through the heart of a mountain that hides Suzaku's relic?"

“Shit, even *I* don’t know where that is.” Shishi shrugged. “So it’s not like I’m going to be able to tell you where its hidden by accident, is it? Reikaku-zan has millions of underground passages — you’d starve sooner than find the right one if you tried to tackle this place on your own. Stop gabbing and just walk, okay? Else I’ll have Chichiri exorcise you or somethin’ when we get to the farm.”

“*Exorcise* me?” Maichu repeated, and Shishi nodded.

“You’ve been warned.” She said frankly, and Maichu felt the hilt of her sword jab firmly into his back. “I won’t tell you again. Move.”

“But *where* did he go?”

Hikari wound the ribbon into the ends of her thick dark hair, shooting Chichiri a startled look as she tossed her plait over her shoulder, getting to her feet. “It’s early — barely past dawn. Why would he be going out at that time? If it wasn’t for the fact you and I are practicing with my magic, I wouldn’t be awake yet!”

She stifled a yawn, casting her reflection in the mirror a rueful glance before shrugging her shoulders.

“I look like I haven’t slept in a week.” She added. “He must be crazy. Even if he is a soldier and used to dawn rising — we’ve had a heavy few weeks and…”

“He didn’t get up early, you know.” Chichiri shook his head. “The truth is that he didn’t go to bed.”

“He didn’t…” Hikari frowned, looking confused. “Then where… what did he…?”

“He went to check the village perimeter for prowlers.” Chichiri hesitated, then, “Hikari, Miramu was in the area late last night.”

“Miramu?” Horror flooded Hikari’s expression. “But…”

“Don’t worry.” Chichiri held up his hands. “I saw Aoi come back to the edge of the village myself, and Myoume met him outside of the farm. She was worried about him too, but he was fine when I saw them. He and she both headed off towards Souun — I guess they’re probably still together. If Myoume’s with him, Hikari, no harm will come to Aoi at Miramu’s hands.”

“I suppose that’s true.” Hikari sighed, relief flickering in her hazel eyes. “But he’s still an idiot. Why would he go after Miramu like that on his own?”

“To protect you, I imagine.” Chichiri said lightly, and Hikari pinkened.

“I wouldn’t ask him to throw himself into danger.” She objected. “It’s stupid. I don’t want him hurt.”

Chichiri eyed her keenly, and there was something in that penetrating ruby gaze that made Hikari’s cheeks deepen in colour.

“What?” She asked. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Yesterday I tried to warn Aoi about the dangers of falling in love with someone from the other world.” Chichiri said gently. “Today I was going to give you the same warning. But Aoi told me that it was too late to make him see things any other way. And I can see by your expression that the same is true for you. I wish I’d been able to prevent it, because in the end it will hurt, Hikari-chan. But if it’s how you feel, I won’t try and intervene any further. After all, it’s just like Miaka and Tamahome, when I think about it… some connections are too strong to be overruled by common sense.”

Hikari sighed, crossing the small chamber to the window as she gazed absently down at the grass below.

“Mother and Father moved Heaven and Earth to be together — literally.” She said sadly. “But I know that they were an exception. Mother was a proper Miko, after all. She could make that wish and keep them together. And even though she did… even though…”

She rubbed her temples.

“I don’t think I could wish to take Aoi home with me.” She murmured. “Because this world is his world and the things and people that he loves are here. Dad made the decision to come after Mother, not the other way around. He wanted to come to our world, and so he did. But this… is not the same. And I wouldn’t… because Aoi belongs here. It’s me who doesn’t. That’s just how it is.”

“You fit in here just fine, Hikari-chan.” Chichiri told her gently. “But I’m glad you’ve realised the implications of your decision. It won’t be an easy parting, but at least you’re prepared for it, and that will help.”

He smiled.

“And now we should get to work on that magic of yours.” He added playfully. “Before Aidou drags you off to help prepare breakfast. We’ve an hour or more before she’ll want to feed us, I imagine — every little counts.”

“All right.” Hikari nodded. “I’ll come and… *Aoi*?”

She faltered, her eyes drawn back to the glass as she caught sight of a figure approaching the farmhouse. As he came more clearly into her line of sight she let out an exclamation, pushing the sorcerer aside as she hurried out of the room and down the stairs.

“Aoi!” She cried, flinging open the front door of the farmhouse and darting out onto the front as the soldier reached the stony pathway. At the sight of him, her heart clenched in her throat, for he was white as a sheet and the front of his clothing was splattered with blood which was already drying to brown in the morning sunlight. His gait was none too steady, and as a memory of Jin’s final battle against Miramu flickered through her thoughts, Hikari hurried forwards, fear giving wings to her feet as she ran to greet him.

“Aoi-kun, what happened?” She demanded, grabbing him by the hands as she stared at him in dismay. “You’re covered in… are you hurt? Did Miramu…”

“Not me. I’m… I’m fine.” Aoiketsu seemed to register her presence fully for the first time, shaking his head as he sought to steady his own wits. “It’s not… I need… where is Chichiri?”

“Not you?” Hikari looked confused, then, “Is it Myoume? That bastard assassin, did he…?”

“Myoume sent me to find Chichiri.” Aoiketsu swallowed hard, and Hikari was alarmed by how ghostly pale the young soldier seemed. “Miramu… attacked… I need… to find Chichiri.”

“I’m right here, Aoi-kun.” At the sound of the sorcerer’s voice, Hikari almost fainted with relief, turning to see the older man watching them, concern in his eyes. “What’s happened? What did Myoume ask you to tell me?”

Aoiketsu swallowed hard again, clearly fighting both shock and dizziness as he turned to face the sorcerer with clouded blue eyes.

“Hyoushin-sama is in the forest.” He said softly. “Kikei sent Miramu to kill him. He’s hurt. Myoume is… with him. We stopped the bleeding but… Chichiri, please. She wanted you to… to go as quickly as you could. She said you’d be able to find her… will you hurry? Please?”

Chichiri’s expression became one of surprise.

“Hyoushin?” He repeated.

“Aoi’s Commander.” Hikari murmured, and Chichiri nodded.

“I know.” He agreed. “But… in Kounan… that is a surprise. And Kikei…? Who is that? Why would he be sending Miramu to hurt anyone?”

“Later. Please. Just go to him.” Aoiketsu begged, urgency in his seiran eyes. “Chichiri, Hyoushin-sama is… poisoned. And… I don’t know… what by.”

“Poison!” Despite herself, fear flickered in Hikari’s heart, and Chichiri’s expression became grim.

“Of course. You’re right.” He agreed. “I’ll go and I’ll do what I can, Aoi. If I can help, you have my word that I will.”

He cast Hikari a glance.

“Look after him, huh?” He said softly. “He’s in shock. Ask Aidou to prepare something herbal to settle his nerves a little, if you like… but don’t let him out of your sight and *don’t* let him come after me. I’ll go to Myoume now — I can sense where she is quite easily, you know. You make sure you all stay right here… all right?”

“Yes, Chichiri.” Hikari nodded her head, and Chichiri offered her a brief smile. Then, with a flick of his fingers he was gone, and the two, schoolgirl and soldier were left alone outside the farmhouse.

It was Hikari who broke the silence.

“You’re covered in blood.” She murmured. “Aoi… what in hell happened?”

“Miramu happened.” Aoiketsu said grimly. “Need I say more?”

“I guess… I guess not.” Hikari admitted. “All right. Come inside, huh? Chichiri will help Hyoushin — I know he will. Even if he is from Kutou, Chichiri’ll help anyone in trouble… you know that, right?”

“I know.” Aoiketsu agreed. “But… Hikari… if it’s poison…”

He faltered, stumbling and Hikari hurriedly moved to steady him, shaking her head.

“Stop it.” She said softly. “Chichiri’s right — this is worse than I’ve seen you before, even where blood’s concerned. Stop thinking and just come with me — all right? I’ll get Aidou-san. Chichiri and Myoume’ll deal with what happened in the forest. You need to be here… and to sit down. Chichiri said you didn’t even sleep last night — no wonder you can’t handle this now. I’m amazed you got this far… if it was so bad as that.”

“It was the *shinken*.” Aoiketsu murmured, and with a jolt, Hikari

realised that the young soldier did not have the blessed blade at his side.

"The *shinken*?" She echoed, as she guided him inside and into the front room. "What do you mean, the *shinken*?"

"When I had it, I didn't seem to notice… the blood." Aoiketsu said slowly. "But when I… went to help the Commander… I dropped it, then. And then…"

He sighed.

"Now I'm useless." He added, frustration in his seiran eyes, but secretly Hikari was glad to see this flicker of life in her companion's expression. "It was all I could do not to pass out in the forest, when I realised how bad he was hurt. And now, too. I'm sorry, Hikari. I'm a mess and I'm making you worry about me."

"It's all right." Hikari assured him. "You're not hurt, which was the first thing that I thought had happened. Remember, when we first met, I told you I didn't mind that you were weak sometimes, because sometimes I am too. You don't have to try to keep up a strong front for my sake. And I have faith in Chichiri. He's smart. He'll know what to do to help Hyoushin."

"Hikari-neechan? Aoi-nii?" At that moment Eiju appeared in the doorway, hands grubby from his morning labours in the woodshed. "What happened? Was there a big fight or something? Aoi-nii, you look like you spilled your guts all down your shirt!"

"Eiju, that's not helping." Hikari sent the youngster a reproachful look as she saw Aoiketsu's face pale once more at the boy's graphic description. "A friend of Aoi's got hurt — that's all. Your Dad's gone to help… can you go find your mother for me?"

"He needs to take a bath." Eiju eyed Aoiketsu critically. "That's what Okaa-san will say. But I'll go tell her anyway."

He disappeared, and Aoiketsu sighed, rubbing his temples as he struggled to gather his wits. Hikari eyed him doubtfully for a moment, then,

"Are you really going to be all right?" She whispered. "He really didn't hurt you, Aoi? Because you look so pale… and…"

"I'm just pathetic when it comes to blood." Aoiketsu said bitterly. "Whatever difference Hotohori-sama's sword might have made, it didn't last. The thing is, Hikari, I was with Hyoushin-sama last night. I mean, I didn't go looking for him — rather it was the other way

around. I didn't know he was in Kounan until he accosted me in the forest. But it was… we'd just parted ways when Miramu attacked him. I should have tried harder to make him come back with me… I feel like I abandoned him. Miramu even said he waited for me to get out of the way… if I'd have stuck with the Commander maybe it wouldn't have happened."

Hikari was silent for a moment. Then she shook her head.

"Noone's to blame for the things Miramu does except Miramu." She said quietly. "But Aoi, you said Kikei sent him. Who is Kikei? I don't remember you mentioning him before — or if you did, I must've just passed over it. The name doesn't mean much at all."

"He's the priest of Seiryuu's shrine." Aoiketsu said heavily. "Back in Kutou. He's the one who first involved Miramu in the mission — the one who gives him his orders, I guess, though I never really thought about it till now. He's also the one who first started to get Kintsusei-sama interested in Shinzahou."

"And now he's trying to kill your Commander? The guy who's gone out and done the dirty work to *get* those Shinzahou?" Hikari looked nonplussed, and Aoiketsu shrugged.

"Kikei and Hyoushin-sama don't really get along." He admitted. "I always thought it was because of that Kutou prejudice some of the older people at court have about Hyoushin-sama being a Meihi. There was some resentment, I think, when the Emperor insisted on making him a part of his court. But… maybe it's something else. Last night Hyoushin-sama told me that Kikei is… is a member of the same tribe my father belonged to. A Hin. And more, he thinks that Kikei is the one who betrayed the Hin… although I don't think he could prove it. When he said that, it all kind of… made sense. And noone except Hyoushin-sama and the Emperor knew about Kikei's roots. Whereas everyone knows about Hyoushin-sama being a Meihi… it's impossible not to know. So he's a convenient scapegoat… considering the implications for Kikei in all of this. He'd need to have someone he could blame, to deflect attention from his own background."

"A Hin?" Hikari's eyes widened. "A… tribesman behind the Emperor?"

"Myoume's prophesy is coming true." Aoiketsu agreed miserably. "In a way that none of us even thought about. And Hyoushin-sama… Hyoushin-sama…"

He faltered, biting his lip, and Hikari saw the glitter of tears in her companion's tired blue eyes. She sighed, putting her arms around him,

and hugging him tightly.

“It’s okay. You’re tired and you’re worried, that’s all.” She said gently. “It’s like Chichiri said. You’re in shock.”

“You’ll get blood all over you, if you hug me like that.” Aoiketsu objected, pushing her back. “Hikari…”

“I don’t care.” Hikari shrugged. “It doesn’t bother me, and I’m worried about you.”

“With good reason, by the looks of it.” Aidou’s voice prevented Aoiketsu from responding, and the two glanced up to see the mistress of the house in the doorway, Eiju in tow. “My son has a penchant for graphic exaggeration, but I can see he wasn’t kidding when he said you’d made a mess of yourself, Aoi-kun. You’re not hurt, though, are you? This blood isn’t yours?”

“No. Chichiri went to help the injured man… he’s a friend of Aoi’s.” Hikari explained, seeing that Aoiketsu was beyond words at Aidou’s brisk appraisal. “But Aoi doesn’t like blood… and he didn’t sleep last night so the shock of it’s gotten to him. Chichiri said you could give him something to steady him — can you?”

“The first thing he needs is a bath.” Aidou said succinctly, and Eiju let out a triumphant exclamation.

“I *told* you so!” He said frankly. “I *said* that’s what she’d tell you to do, Aoi-nii.”

“Well, he’s not the only one, Ei-kun.” Aidou cast her son a sidelong glance. “You’ve been busy with the wood all morning. Meikyo’s brought water up from the well, so you make yourself useful and go see to the both of you cleaning yourselves up. I’ll have some fresh clothing laid out for you both, and we’ll see how you feel when you’re clean of this stuff, Aoi. Somehow I think you’ll feel better without herbs, if we just get you away from the blood. Right?”

Aoiketsu gazed at her in surprise for a moment, then he offered her a faint smile, nodding his head.

“I think so.” He agreed. “Thank you, Aidou-san. I’m sorry to cause you trouble.”

“Well, you’re a man, so I don’t expect any different.” Aidou sighed, shrugging her shoulders as if resigned to the fact. “Go on. Eiju, don’t pull that face. If you knew I’d send Aoi to bath, you must’ve known that I wouldn’t have you at my breakfast table with hands as grubby as those. Take him and don’t complain — I’m trusting you to make

sure the both of you get cleaned up."

Eiju cast his mother a reproachful look, then he sighed, and Hikari knew he'd accepted defeat.

"Yes, Okaa-san." He said wearily. "Come on, Aoi-nii. We better do what we're told."

He grabbed Aoiketsu by the sleeve, pulling him to his feet and out of the room. Hikari watched them leave, then she met Aidou's gaze, and sighed, shaking her head.

"His friend is badly hurt?" Aidou asked softly, and Hikari nodded.

"The man who took Meikyo… did it." She said unevenly. "He used poison, Aidou-san. Like he did… to kill Jin. And I don't know… if Chichiri can really help."

"I see." Aidou's expression became grave. She hesitated for a moment, then she sank down onto the seat beside the young girl, placing a gentle arm around her shoulders.

"You're worried about Aoi, I can tell — but you're also worried about the injured man too, aren't you?" She asked. Hikari nodded.

"I don't really know him — in fact, he's been more like our enemy than our friend in some ways." She admitted. "But I don't really think he is that, not any more. When we were in Hokkan, he said… things that made me think that perhaps I'd judged him wrong. And Aoi… to Aoi…"

She sighed again.

"To Aoi he's like a father." She admitted reluctantly. "And that makes it hurt for me too, Aidou-san. Because if it was my Dad… I… I don't know what I'd do."

"So it's that way." Aidou pursed her lips. "I thought there was something more than just squeamishness in his pallor. Still, a bath will help and Eiju's a plain-spoken, matter-of-fact young man — Aoi needs that, I think, right now. Besides, I imagine that if it's that bad, Hou Jun will bring the injured man back here. And you can best help me by preparing the room at the back of the house into some form of a sickroom. We'll have to do without it for seeing clients for the time being — this looks like being more important."

"And if he dies?" Hikari asked softly. Aidou spread her hands.

"Then we'll make him comfortable until he does." She said gently. "But I expect Hou Jun will want to try and help him, even if it proves

impossible. He's like that, my husband. He always has been."

She eyed Hikari critically.

"Thanks to the heat of Kounan's summer mornings, you've not taken any of the blood onto your own gown — which I'm glad of, since that one is fresh this morning." She said evenly. "That being the case, and since Hou Jun is otherwise engaged, it will be quicker if we both go and find blankets and other things for this man to use."

"I'll help." Hikari nodded. "Just tell me what I can do and I'll do it."

She clenched her fists.

"Miramu's a demon." She added. "But when Jin died I promised myself that I'd not let that stupid assassin kill anyone else. So if Chichiri's going to try and save Hyoushin, I'll do whatever I can to help!"

Chapter 10

Chapter Nine

"Well?"

Chichiri glanced up at the sound of the soft-spoken question, meeting Myoume's anxious indigo eyes with grave ones of his own. For a moment he did not speak, getting slowly to his feet as he gazed down at the patient who lay unconscious on the makeshift pallet before him. On arrival in the forest, he had quickly realised the growing severity of the Meihi's condition and had immediately made the decision to bring him back to the Ri farm, where he knew there was a greater range of herbs available. Aidou's forward thinking and efficiency had come into its own, for on his return he had found a chamber ready prepared for the incoming invalid, and before long Hyoushin had been installed in the back room of the farmhouse, with Meikyo sent running to draw more water from the well in order to properly clean the man's wounds.

But even despite these things, as he placed his fingers against the tribesman's brow, Chichiri was still unsure whether or not his family's quick actions would do any good.

He sighed, drawing his hand away from the sick man as he slowly shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know." He admitted. "Myoume, what you said to me last night — about this man not being the one that's our enemy — I've come to the same conclusion. When you speak to Aoi, it's easy to realise that, given the boy's outlook and attitude, the man who trained him can't possibly be someone capable of the deceptions you've predicted. But… I almost think we've come by the information too late. Aoi told you he'd been poisoned… didn't he? And I think he's right — the wound's no longer bleeding, but already… there's signs of something else at work. He's lost blood, but not enough of it to be fatal. A strong man of Hyoushin's calibre should have at least regained consciousness by now. Yet he hasn't stirred. And more concerning to me… is the dry warmth of his skin. He's starting to develop a fever… and I'm not quite sure what remedies might counter it."

Myoume chewed on her lip, her blue eyes clouding as she absorbed this.

“You mean he’s dying?” She whispered, and Chichiri spread his hands.

“I’m not a doctor.” He said helplessly. “All I know I learnt from Mitsukake, or from my own meagre experience in the village since I settled here with Aidou. My spirit is more than willing — to help people is the reason I began this life, after all. But… the ability…”

He rubbed his temples.

“If Mitsukake were here, he’d know what to do.” He added. “But I don’t even have the holy water that he gave me when he died. I left it with the young boy that Mitsukake was reincarnated into… with him and his family. It belonged with him, after all… it was never my magic to use. And at that point I felt that my duty as Chichiri had really ended. I didn’t anticipate Hikari’s coming, or any of this.”

Myoume dropped down onto her knees beside the bed.

“I’ve been really stupid.” She said softly. “I’ve not stopped and let Byakko speak to me… I’ve built my own assumptions based on things I thought I knew. Hyoushin is a member of a tribe, and he has good reason to hate the Imperial house of Kutou. But even so, it doesn’t follow that he *must* hate them. I’ve spent a lot of time emphasising to the others how Kintsusei-sama is not an evil man. If that’s so, why do I presume Hyoushin *would* hate him, for things he probably had no part in ordering? I should have listened to Aoi from the beginning. Because I didn’t… perhaps this is what happens. When I ignore Byakko and go with my own instincts… people become hurt.”

“It’s not your fault.” Chichiri said gently. “And you mustn’t feel that way. You probably saved him, by intervening with Miramu when you did. You know that you’re the only one who can keep him at bay… if you hadn’t, Hyoushin may already be dead.”

“But if this poison is as virulent as the one which killed Jin, have I simply bought him more time to suffer in?” Myoume asked hopelessly. “I don’t want that, either.”

“I don’t know.” Chichiri frowned, pursing his lips. “You said that Jin died almost immediately — or at least, within minutes of sustaining the wound. The poison was in his system and he died in Shishi’s arms not long after Miramu vanished. But if we assume that Miramu attacked Hyoushin when Aoi was coming back to the village and encountering you, then not only was the poison in Hyoushin’s system *while* he was facing Miramu — but Hyoushin was still on his feet until Miramu disappeared. He may even still have been, if not for the loss of blood at the scene. His immediate faintness was probably

caused by that… but now the bleeding's been stopped, he should have begun to recover. It seems instead that the poison has begun to take a hold."

"Meaning what, exactly?" Myoume demanded, and Chichiri put a gentle hand on her arm.

"Your family are apothecaries. You understand as well as I do that different poisons work in different ways." He said quietly. "Whatever poison killed Jin was swift-acting. Whatever it is that's infiltrating Hyoushin's system is not. Tell me again what happened when Miramu left. What did Hyoushin do… when you and Aoi were there?"

"When Miramu vanished, he dropped his sword." Myoume remembered slowly. "And he buckled — like he lost his balance. He put his hand out to stop himself but it… didn't hold him. And Aoi caught him before he could fall headlong."

"Which arm?" Chichiri frowned.

"His sword arm." Myoume replied. "He dropped the weapon to try and steady himself… so I remember."

"His sword arm." Chichiri sank down onto the seat beside the bed, moving to straighten the covers over the Meihi's still form as he did so. "But that doesn't make any sense at all. I don't understand… the wound is on his left side. But he'd fight…"

"He was holding the weapon in his left hand." Myoume shook her head. "I don't know if that was because he was stemming the blood with his right — but that's what happened."

"Then that seems a bit more logical." Chichiri's expression cleared. "All right. So whatever the poison is, it spread through the wound and into Hyoushin's left arm. Perhaps whatever it is is a paralysing agent… not Miramu's final blow, but a temporary measure."

"So it might not kill him after all?" Myoume looked anxious. Chichiri sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

"I don't know." He confessed. "Paralysing poisons paralyse more than just limbs. His breathing, his heart… those things can be stopped, too. And I don't know what agent was used or how strong it is. I think… it doesn't mean that he's not at risk. The trouble is we also don't know very much about the circumstances of this. Why Hyoushin is in Kounan. Whether he's been travelling constantly or whether he's been stopping off along the way. What else has motivated him to travel — whether he was in good health when he left. These things are unknown."

"Chichiri…?"

Before Myoume could respond, a tentative voice came from the doorway and both sorcerer and prophet turned to see Aoiketsu standing there, an apprehensive look on his young features.

"Aoi-kun!" Myoume looked surprised. "I thought you were…"

"I'm all right now." Aoiketsu shook his head. "I'm clean, and there's no more blood. And I… I want to know what's going on with the Commander. Aidou-san said he was here… and Hikari said she helped prepare the room for him, so I knew… I had to…"

"Then come in." Chichiri nodded, gesturing for the young soldier to join them. "But I can't give you any good news, I'm afraid. The bleeding's been stopped — you and Myoume did a good job, and I've cleaned and bound it to prevent infection. But you said he'd been poisoned — and that's an unknown factor. Unless you happen to know what by…"

"I don't." Aoiketsu shook his head, biting his lip as he came hesitantly to the bedside. He glanced down at the still Meihi, and a mixture of emotions flitted through his seiran eyes. Then he sighed.

"He just said 'poison'." He added. "Then he passed out."

"Myoume said he put out his left arm to steady himself, but it didn't hold him." Chichiri said. "Is that what you remember, too?"

"Yes. So I dropped the *shinken* and caught him." Aoiketsu agreed. Then his eyes widened. "Shit… the *shinken*! I forgot all about it!"

"It's all right. I brought it back." Myoume said softly. "You had other things on your mind when I sent you back here… so I took responsibility for bringing it home. It… and Hyoushin's own blade, too."

"Thank God for that." Aoiketsu sighed. "Reizeitei-sama's just about forgiven me for spying in Kounan. I don't think he'd love me much if I lost his father's blade."

"I think he'd understand, if he knew it was discarded to help your own father." Chichiri said softly. "Or at least, as close a thing as you have… Aoi-kun, I'm sorry. I wish I could do more… as it is, if I don't know what toxin Miramu used, finding an antidote is near impossible."

Aoiketsu closed his eyes briefly, then,

"I wish I knew." He admitted. "But that was all he said. Poison.

That was all."

"Myoume said he was holding his sword in his left hand — that he dropped it when he fell." Chichiri added. Aoiketsu nodded.

"Yes." He agreed. "Why? What about it?"

"Because it would make sense if the poison was affecting that side of his body, since the wound is on the left side. That's all." Chichiri responded. "But what's confusing me is Miramu's aim. He's a crack shot — so why did he hit Hyoushin there?"

"Because Hyoushin-sama fights left-handed." Aoiketsu said soberly, a glitter of anger in his indigo eyes. "Miramu knows that. Anyone who's travelled with the Commander knows it, too. It's why he's so strong — why he's so difficult to disarm. So Miramu… I guess Miramu was trying to disarm him, by weakening his left hand so he couldn't hold his sword."

"*Left*-handed?" Chichiri looked startled. "I see. Yes. Then I think I'm right — this shot wasn't intended to kill Hyoushin. You and Myoume interrupted before Miramu could fire the fatal blow."

"It *was* intended to weaken him." Myoume murmured. "Which means my brother was afraid of his strength. He didn't want the risk of being hurt himself."

"Hyoushin-sama is not an amateur fighter." Aoiketsu said simply. "I'm the strongest soldier in the Imperial Guard but I've never managed to disarm him. None of us have. That's why he's the Emperor's protector — he always has been. Because noone can take his blade from him in open combat."

He clenched his fists.

"Miramu's a goddamn coward." He muttered. "I wish I had him here right now to tell him so, too."

"Aoi." Chichiri shook his head, and Aoiketsu sighed, sending Myoume an apologetic look.

"I'm sorry." He said frankly. "But right now it's how I feel."

"It's all right." Myoume sighed, suddenly looking tired. "I can't refute anything you've said, Aoi. You've every reason to feel the way you do, and I won't try and defend him to you."

Chichiri brushed stray strands of the thick silver hair out of Hyoushin's face, looking thoughtful.

"He seems tired." He decided. "If he was to wake, maybe we could

ask him if he knows more about Miramu's style of poison. Maybe the man said something… I don't know."

He glanced at Aoiketsu.

"You encountered him by chance on your wandering through the forest last night?" He asked. Aoiketsu nodded.

"Completely by chance. I thought he was someone from Kaou-zan, until he revealed who he was." He agreed. "He said that something had happened in Kutou by which he'd been ousted — some kind of plot involving the priest known as Kikei. He's the traitor — he's a Hin, and he's the one who's plotting — I'm sure of it. It's the only thing that makes sense. And the Commander also… he also said that Maichu was with him. That he had to go back to Souun because Maichu would be waiting for him. So if that's the case… I need to go to Souun. Right away. I need to find Maichu — he'll know a lot more than I do, after all. And he won't trust anyone else except me — so I'll have to ride there and…"

"You need to stop running before you drop." Chichiri cautioned. "You've had a shock this morning, coupled with no sleep last night. You may be better now, Aoi-kun, but you're still paler than normal and you've not eaten breakfast, yet. Your friend will remain in Souun a while… let's not rush into things, all right? When you've eaten something, then maybe you can ride to Souun… but not until."

"I'm not really hungry."

"Perhaps not, but you'll need the energy." Chichiri was firm. "Myoume said you were sick, in the forest, and you looked ready to collapse when you got back here. I'm not going to let you run riot around the South-West if you're not up to it. And if you're not up to breakfast, you know, you're definitely not up to riding. You'll fall from your horse and be hurt and that won't help either Maichu or your Commander, now will it?"

"I guess it won't." Aoiketsu admitted.

"Then it's settled." Chichiri offered him a faint smile. "I know you're worried, Aoi-kun, and I don't know whether or not there's anything we can do to help your Commander survive. That's the honest truth of it. But even if that's so, and even if the worst does happen — Kutou still needs you. More than ever, now. And so does Hikari… you understand that, don't you?"

Aoiketsu's eyes widened, and something in his expression told the sorcerer that the young soldier had understood. He nodded.

“Yes.” He agreed quietly. “It seems that we’ve been chasing the wrong God. Hikari’s reasons for being here… are not entirely what we expected them to be. And you’ve seen it too, clearly. Your own connection to her is through Seiryuu — you as Nakago’s son, and her as Kutou’s Miko.”

“Hyoushin-sama said that.” Aoiketsu admitted. “He said that he and Maichu came to find her. To negotiate with the South in order to try and get their help. He said she was Seiryuu no Miko and I… I believe him. But I haven’t… to Hikari. Have you…?”

“Not yet. And it can wait a while longer.” Chichiri shook his head. “Right now, Hyoushin’s life is our immediate concern. And yours is to find breakfast and then this Maichu… so we can discover exactly what’s going on in Kutou.”

“So this is the Eastern Village, huh?”

As Shishi and Maichu walked the winding road between the rows of ramshackle houses, the young soldier kicked idly at a pebble, glancing around him as he absorbed his surroundings pensively. “An’ Aoi’s been hidin’ out in this place? For real?”

“There’s no need to look down your nose at it.” Shishi snapped, and Maichu shook his head.

“I ain’t.” He said with a shrug. “I couldn’t — the place I grew up in wasn’t much different, to tell you the truth. I just thought it was ironic, that’s all. Aoi, who’s spent all of his life at court, hidin’ out in a provincial village like the one I couldn’t wait to get out of.”

“So you’re not from Kutou’s capital, then?” Shishi looked startled, and Maichu shook his head.

“Nope.” He agreed. “My people are tanners. They don’t really give a shit about fightin’ Kutou’s battles an’ all of that. So long as they do okay business an’ noone kills their tradin’ partners, they’re fine. But my cousin was a soldier an’ I heard lots o’ stories from him about fightin’ for the Emperor. So I wanted to follow his example… that’s why I left.”

“Because your cousin told you going out killing people was fun, huh?” Shishi snorted. “And you said you had a brain?”

“Don’t be annoying.” Maichu grimaced at her. “It ain’t that way. Kisha was hurt fightin’ — he lost his fingers an’ he couldn’t hold his sword, so I knew it wasn’t just a game. But I didn’t want to be a tanner. I wanted to do somethin’ important. So I did. That’s all.”

“An’ now you’re stuck in Kounan, without a sword an’ effectively as my prisoner.” Shishi reminded him. “Was it worth it?”

“Yes.” Maichu said honestly, realising as he did so that he meant it. “Even if I spent last night holed up in a cell on your mountain. It happened in Kintsusei-sama’s name. I ain’t jus’ potterin’ around doin’ things for no reason. I’m doin’ somethin’ to help my country. So of course it’s worth it. Although you’re a bandit — so maybe it’s different for you.”

“Don’t see why.” Shishi frowned. “Reikaku-zan’s bandits fought an’ died for Saihitei-sama in the last war, y’know. Kashira’s Reizeitei-sama’s sworn ally — he pretty much runs this region with the Emperor’s direct blessing. I’ve been to the palace an’ knelt before him an’ before the place Hotohori-sama is buried. Don’t talk down to me just because I’m not a soldier. You don’t haveta be, you know, to care about protectin’ your country.”

“I s’pose.” Maichu acknowledged. “All right.”

He frowned, turning to survey the path along which they had just come.

“The mountain looks friggin’ high from here.” He added. “An’ I’d never remember those passages you dragged me down if I went back there again. No wonder there’s so many stories about Reikaku-zan an’ the people there. Jus’ so long as your Kashira ain’t gonna gut me for escapin’ like this. I’ve heard enough stories about him throwin’ fire an’ I don’t need to see him more angry than he was yesterday.”

“No, you don’t, because he’d kill you.” Shishi said pragmatically. “But *I’ll* take the flack for this, not you.”

“I still don’t totally understand why you helped me out.”

“Because I want to know what’s goin’ on, too. An’ like I said, I trust Aoi.” Shishi responded. “So if you’ll only speak to him — that’s where you need to go.”

She paused, gesturing to the building in front of them.

“An’ here we are.” She added. “This is where my Uncle an’ Aunt live… an’ where Aoi’s been stayin’, since he’s been with us.”

“This place, huh?” Maichu eyed the farmhouse critically. “It ain’t as poky a place as I pictured. I guess maybe he has some court sense about him after all.”

“Chichiri’s effectively head of the village, since he and Aidou-obasama rebuilt it after it burnt down.” Shishi responded. “An’

Chichiri's Suzaku's, so people gravitate to him for protection. Quit gawking at it an' come on, will you? Aoi'll be here, because this is where Hiki is stayin', too. An' he won't let her too far out of his sight — not even now we're safe in the South."

"Hiki?" Maichu blinked, staring at Shishi in bewilderment, but before the young bandit could respond, the door of the house flew open and a small blur of blue fabric and red hair came flying out, letting out an exclamation as she grabbed Shishi urgently by the hands.

"*Meikyo*?" Shishi gathered her wits, staring at the small girl in astonishment. "Shit, what the hell's gotten into you? You're runnin' round like a mad thing — is it that unusual for me to come here, or…?"

"I've got to go draw more water — will you help me?" Meikyo begged breathlessly, big ruby eyes flickering with anxiety as she gazed up at her cousin. "Please, Shishi — if you do, it'll be quicker… and it's really important! Papa has a patient… and…"

"A patient?" Shishi frowned. "Hang on, and take a deep breath. Then tell me what's up, okay? Because I don't understand — why all the panic?"

"A friend of Aoi-nii's got hurt in the forest." Meikyo obediently took a deep breath, stepping back as she glanced from Shishi to her companion earnestly. "And Papa brought him here, but he's sick and he's got a fever and I have to get so much water, because he had blood all over him, and so did Aoi-nii… and Eiju-nii needed to wash too, and there wasn't enough water, and… I'm so *tired*!"

She let out a heavy sigh as if to emphasise this final sentiment, and Shishi frowned.

"A friend of Aoi's?" She asked softly. "But… Aoi's friend… is right here. What do you mean?"

Maichu gazed at the small girl, a curl of fear beginning to work its way up inside his heart.

"Hyoushin-sama." He whispered. Meikyo looked startled, gazing at Maichu in confusion. Then she nodded his head.

"That's right." She agreed. "He looks like an angel. I didn't think angels could get hurt, but Papa said he wasn't a proper angel and that we needed to help him. And that was what Aoi-nii said his name was. Hyou… shin. Do you know him too, Oniisan?"

“Shit.” Maichu resisted the urge to grab the small, fragile child by the shoulders, gazing at her in consternation. “How hurt? What happened? What’s wrong with him? And how did he end up… how is he here?”

“Papa brought him. With his magic.” Meikyo said matter-of-factly, as if that explained everything. “He was in the forest, but he couldn’t get up, so Papa used his Suzaku power and brought him back home. Will you help me get water, Shishi? My arms feel like they’re seven miles longer already, and Eiju-nii is busy weeding the herbs so I can’t ask him!”

“*Hyoushin* is in Kounan, too?” Shishi sent Maichu an accusing look. “How come you forgot to mention that?”

“Because it’s not your business?” Maichu retorted. “You didn’t ask if I’d come here alone.”

“Well, obviously it *is* our business, if he’s wound up hurt and here.” Shishi countered. “What’s happened to him, Mei-chan? Do you know?”

“The bad man did it.” Meikyo replied with an involuntary shiver. “The one who took me away and wanted to hurt me.”

“Miramu?” Shishi’s eyes widened. “Shit… *Miramu*’s in Kounan, too? What is this, a friggin’ *convention* noone told me about?”

“Miramu.” Maichu’s expression became one of alarm. “Hyoushin-sama said it… he said that he thought Miramu might… but… dammit, why the hell did I leave him on his own? I got taken prisoner on your damn mountain and I wasn’t there to prevent this, and now… what did he do to him? Kid, tell me — what did Miramu do?”

“I’m not ‘Kid’. I’m Ri Meikyo.” Meikyo said firmly, drawing herself up to her full height as a faintly indignant look glittered in her ruby eyes. “And all I know is that he got hit by an arrow and there was a lot of blood.”

Maichu muttered another curse, pushing past the child and into the hallway of the house. Behind him, he heard Shishi yell his name, and the sound of the bandit hurrying after him, but he paid her no attention, his mind only on finding his wounded commander and his soldier comrade. As he reached the end of the hallway, however, Aidou emerged from the kitchen, stopping dead as she registered the presence of a stranger in her house.

“Who are you?” She demanded, and Maichu stared at her, all pretence at manners gone in his anxiety.

“I want to see Hyoushin-sama.” He said bluntly. “I know he’s here and I want to see him.”

“I see.” Aidou’s eyes narrowed, and she glanced him up and down, as if absorbing his appearance. As she did so, Maichu saw a flicker of the same fire in her bronze eyes as both Shishi and the mountain Kashira shared and he began to realise that his mode of address had perhaps been unwise.

At length, Aidou spoke again, reaching out strong arms to turn him around in the direction of the farmhouse door.

“This is the way you need to go. Back outside.” She said briskly, and Maichu frowned.

“But I want to see my Commander!”

“When you’ve found your manners, you can ask again.” Aidou was unmoved. “But I don’t allow strange men to barge into this house without an invitation.”

“It’s all right, Aidou-obasama. He’s with me.” Shishi emerged at that point, Meikyo in tow, and Maichu was surprised at how relieved he was to see her. At her words, the older woman sighed, releasing her grip as she shrugged her shoulders in resignation.

“I should have guessed he was a friend of yours, Shi-chan.” She said evenly. “He has blatantly mountain manners.”

“He’s not from Reikaku-zan — and he’s not really my friend, either.” Shishi shook her head. “Actually, he’s a friend of Aoi’s. Is it true that Hyoushin’s been brought here? Meikyo said he was hit by an arrow… that’s what happened?”

“Of course it is!” Meikyo piped in indignantly. “I don’t tell fibs, Shishi!”

“I didn’t say you did, chibi.” Shishi shook her head. “But I just want to know exactly what’s going on.”

“Hou Jun brought a man back here about half an hour ago.” Aidou nodded. “Hyoushin was his name… at least, so far as I understand it. He’s known to Aoiketsu, anyhow — and if this young ragamuffin is too, then that makes a certain kind of sense. Although if you’re going to bring us houseguests, Shishi, you could at least ask them to brush their hair and change their clothes before they do. I don’t keep this house clean so your companions can turn it into a pigsty, you know.”

“It wasn’t exactly my fault.” Maichu protested, waving a hand in Shishi’s direction. “*She* dragged me through a zillion tunnels to get

here!”

Shishi sighed, rolling her eyes.

“You really are writing yourself a death warrant, you know that?” She told him cuttingly. “I’m sorry, Aidou-obasama. It’s my fault — but I won’t let him sit on anything or get dust or mountain mud all round your house. If Aoi is here, can we speak to him instead? It’s sort of important.”

“He and Hikari are just finishing breakfast.” Aidou relented, nodding her head. “There may be a little left… if the two of you are hungry enough to join them.”

“We left the mountain without eating.” Shishi nodded. “Thank you, Obasama. Maichu, shut your gaping trap and follow me, before you do or say something that’ll get you a belting — I won’t be warning you a second time. Okay?”

Maichu stared at her for a moment, ready and willing to retort, but as he did so, he caught Aidou’s eye and hesitated, the words dying on his lips as he realised that he was better off doing as the young bandit had advised. He shut his mouth with a snap, turning instead and following Shishi along the narrow passage to the end room, which, he soon discovered, was the Ri family’s cosy dining area.

At the sight of them, Aoiketsu was on his feet, sending his bowl flying as he let out an exclamation, and the dark-haired girl at his left hand shrieked, lunging to catch the ceramic as as the chopsticks clattered against the far wall.

“Aoi, you idiot! Stop jumping up and down! It’s only Shishi!”

“Well, I sort of brought a friend.” Shishi said sheepishly, dragging Maichu more firmly into the room and into Hikari’s line of sight for the first time. “Aoi, I think this belongs to you.”

“Hey, get off me.” Maichu glared at her. “I don’t belong to anyone, thank you! And I don’t need to be pulled or pushed anywhere — I can walk!”

“You know this guy, Aoi?” The girl with the long dark twist of hair sent the soldier a quizzical look, and as she did so, Maichu realised who she was.

“Shit. Sukunami Hikari.” He murmured, then, “Dammit… for real? *That’s* the girl all the fuss is about?”

“Maichu… shut… your… trap.” Shishi said pointedly, exasperation in her tones. “Geez, what is wrong with you? Do you just say the first

thing that comes into your head, or what?"

"Maichu?" Hikari's eyes widened as she stared at the newcomer anew. "*You're* Shi Maichu? You're Aoi's friend from Kutou? But…"

"You were supposed to be in Souun." Aoiketsu came to grasp his friend by the hand, relief clear in his seiran eyes. "I was going to ride there to find you — to tell you what had happened. Hyoushin-sama said he was meeting with you there later today, and so I thought if I went… I thought you'd come back with me. But you're with Shishi — and you're here."

"He decided to visit Reikaku-zan last night." Shishi said frankly. "And Kashira decided he should be offered mountain hospitality on account of his trespassing. But I let him loose — because he wanted to speak to you, and I figured that if he's your friend… we can trust him. Was I right?"

Aoiketsu stared at the young bandit for a moment, then a smile touched his lips. He nodded.

"I trust Maichu with my life." He agreed. "Thank you, Shishi. Tasuki wasn't too pissed at you, for going behind his back?"

"Don't know, yet." Shishi owned. "But I'll find out soon enough, when I go home. Even so, though, Kashira's been kept out of a lot of this since Jin died. He doesn't know as much of what's going on. So I figure his judgement where Kutou's people are concerned might be a bit messed up. An' if Miramu's in Kounan, he'd better steer clear of the mountain. Because Papa'll kill him. No questions asked."

"Miramu's not an easy enemy to take out." Maichu pointed out. "Even your fire-throwing Kashira might have trouble against him."

"I think if Tasuki wanted to destroy someone, he could do it well enough." Aoiketsu said quietly, and Shishi nodded her head.

"He was really pissed about Jin's death." She agreed. "He'd like the chance to do something to even the score. Miramu might be a hot shot with a bow and arrow. But Kashira's got the tessen. An' no amount of trickery would cancel that out. He'd be chargrilled."

"Right now that would suit me fine." Aoiketsu said darkly, and Maichu shot his friend a startled look. Then, as he registered the expression in the seiran eyes, comprehension flickered in his heart.

"Hyoushin-sama is bad, huh?" He asked softly, and Aoiketsu nodded.

"Chichiri and Myoume have been treating him." He agreed. "But…

we don't know what the hell poison Miramu pumped into him. And without knowing that, there's no way of finding an antidote. He hasn't even woken up — and he's starting a fever. It was a mess, Maichu. I'm glad you're here… if Chichiri agrees, you should stay here now, until we know what's going on."

"Which is where you might come in." Hikari said thoughtfully. "Maichu-san, Aoi was going to look for you because he thought you'd be worried if Hyoushin didn't come back — but also because you know what's going on in Kutou better than we do. And… we need to know the things you know. Because… in the end… we've got to try and save Kutou, haven't we?"

Maichu stared at her, taking in her appearance for a moment as he digested her words. She did not look, he mused, a bit like either a girl from another world or a divine priestess. In fact, he reflected, she seemed just like an ordinary young girl of fifteen or sixteen, and though she was not unattractive, nor was she overly pretty or distinctive in her appearance. And yet, as he looked at her, he saw something burning in the depths of her hazel eyes, and with a jolt he realised it was resolution. In that moment he registered that, deceiving though her appearance was, Sukunami Hikari was exactly what Hyoushin had said she was.

Seiryuu no Miko, and the one who would somehow save his homeland from destruction.

"Maichu?" Aoiketsu frowned. "It's all right, you know. Hikari and Shishi — they're people I trust. I know that they're here and we're from Kutou — but if we're going to save the Emperor, we need to work with them. Myoume — Toroki — too. We all need to work together… otherwise we can't do this. So if you know something, tell us. Hyoushin-sama told me that he'd been ousted and that you were essentially running south. Is it Kikei? Is that what happened?"

"Yes." Maichu's eyes darkened as he nodded his head. "That fat old priest, using Kayu as his stupid little puppet. He sent a message to us in Touran, discharging Hyoushin-sama of his command. It was sealed with Kintsusei-sama's stamp, so Kayu and the rest flustered around it and insisted on carrying it out. Hyoushin-sama… he didn't contest it, but just left. And I went after him. From what Hyoushin-sama's said, during our journey south, he thinks Kikei's used him as a scapegoat to hide the fact he's a Hin and the real traitor from the Emperor's eyes. But as far as we know, Kintsusei-sama hasn't been hurt in any way. Rather Kikei just wanted the Commander out of the way. And… possibly… us too. I don't know where you figure in all of this, but I'm

pretty sure I'm on the outlaw list now I chose to run with Hyoushin-sama and not pander to Kikei's stupid falsified orders."

"So we have to go to Kutou and risk being shot on sight, basically?" Hikari sighed, resting her chin in her hands. "That's depressing. Everyone in Kutou hates us already, and now they also hate the people from Kutou that might work with us, too?"

"I don't know about Aoi." Maichu repeated. "Because he was sent south by Imperial order before all of this kicked off. But Miramu will probably go back and report that Hyoushin was in the South-west of Kounan. And it doesn't take a genius to figure out that he'd come here to find you."

"Miramu saw me." Aoiketsu nodded, and Maichu saw that faint glitter of anger in his friend's gaze once more. "But he said something odd. He said he'd waited for me to get out of his way before he launched his attack on Hyoushin-sama. So Kikei hasn't ordered me killed. Nor have I been recalled to Kutou, though. What do you suppose that means?"

"Perhaps Miramu's sweet on you." Maichu eyed his friend critically. "You still look as much like a girl as ever, even if you're not dressed up all fancy and noble-son-ish any more. You never know. He's pretty twisted, so he might just have fallen for you."

"Shut up, idiot." Aoiketsu shook his head impatiently. "I'm being serious."

"So am I." Maichu objected.

Hikari laughed.

"You two really aren't at all alike." She remarked. "It's funny that you're friends."

"Not really." Aoiketsu looked surprised. "I mean, yes, we are different but we both believe in the same things. Namely Kutou."

"And that Hyoushin-sama ain't a traitor." Maichu added grimly. Aoiketsu's expression became shadowed, and he nodded.

"And that." He agreed.

"I vote we let them jaw it out for a while." Shishi cast Hikari a glance. "Meikyo was begging for help drawing water and we could go give the poor kid a hand — she's manning the well on her own. An' so long as he's with Aoi, I figure Maichu won't get into any trouble. I'm in no hurry to go home, so I'll do Meikyo's chores a while first. Come with me, Hiki — we'll let them have their boys chat in peace."

“Okay.” Hikari looked startled, but she nodded her head. “I’m coming. Aoi, since you’re not riding to Souun, come find us when you’re done — okay? Maichu-san too. The less we disturb Chichiri while he’s trying to help Hyoushin the better.”

“Got it.” Aoiketsu agreed. “Thanks, Hikari.”

Hikari flashed him a smile, and Maichu’s eyes widened as he caught the glance between the two. Then the girls were gone, and he wheeled on his friend, grabbing him around the wrists as he sent him an accusatory look.

“Shit, Aoi!” He exclaimed. “You’ve damn well fallen for that chick, haven’t you?”

Aoiketsu started, a guilty look in his eyes, and Maichu cursed, shaking his head slowly.

“Of all the frigging times to discover women, you choose right now.” He muttered. “I should’ve known it of you. Right when Kutou’s fallin’ apart, you fall for the one girl you damn well can’t have — at least, I assume you know that she’s not normal? Hyoushin-sama said she’s from the Miko’s world, so she’s not like the rest of us.”

“Hikari’s normal.” Aoiketsu objected. “And yes, I know that. But it’s… more than that. Maichu, Hikari’s… she’s Seiryuu’s Priestess. Even if she doesn’t know it yet. And I… I’m Nakago’s son. The connection between us… is Seiryuu’s doing. It’s not my fault… I couldn’t help it. I mean, it’s grown stronger, but… Seiryuu began it. I just… went along for the ride. I think we both did.”

“Seiryuu no Miko.” Maichu echoed. “So that *was* the thing you stumbled on — and couldn’t tell me. That this Hikari kid is the way to save Kutou — the method you said was dangerous and possibly like treason, if people saw you pursuing it.”

“Hikari’s the only one who can.” Aoiketsu agreed. “And it worries me, because she’ll put herself in danger to do it. But… she will do it, Maichu. She promised me already that if there was something she could do to help Kutou, she would. And I didn’t know till last night that she was Seiryuu’s Miko. Chichiri said not to mention it to her yet — I think he wants to broach it with her himself, so I said all right. But I did know she was powerful. And that… somehow she was different. Myoume’s seen it too… Toroki, I mean. Her prediction… is that Hikari is the only one who can intervene. Because she’s from that world — and people from there aren’t governed by the same rules we are. She can change things… and she’s the only hope we have.”

“Then Hyoushin-sama was right to come South to find you.” Maichu said soberly. “Even if it put him in danger. You’ve seen him, Aoi. Is it as bad as it sounds?”

“Yes.” Aoiketsu chewed on his lip. “He collapsed in the forest and he hasn’t woken since. He was starting a fever, and Chichiri doesn’t know what to give him to try and combat the poison, since he doesn’t know what it is. He’s doing his best, though. Maichu, even though he fought in the war, and even though he saw people he cared about killed by Kutou’s people — he’s still giving everything he has to trying to help the Commander. He’s someone we can trust in — I know that. Him and Tasuki, too. They’re good people. And we need their help. You and I… we can’t do this on our own.”

“You think the Commander’s not going to survive, don’t you?” Maichu said sharply, and Aoiketsu spread his hands.

“I don’t know.” he said honestly. “But Chichiri said I had to focus on Kutou and realise they needed me. No matter what happens. I’m frightened, Maichu — I don’t want to be on my own and he’s always been there to guide me. But I… I have to find my own strength, too. We all do. Shishi’s done it, since Jin died — and it’s my turn, now. Whatever happens with Hyoushin-sama — Seiryuu chose me to fight this fight and I have to do it myself. Not through someone else.”

Maichu stared at his friend. Then he grinned, bringing his hand down firmly on his companion’s shoulder.

“You sound more like a soldier, talking like that.” he reflected. “More like the Shougun’s son than I’ve ever heard you before.”

“Well, that’s what I am.” Aoiketsu shrugged. “For better or worse, I can’t escape the connection. And Chichiri said it wasn’t bad to be like him in some ways. So long as I wasn’t like him in all ways — and I won’t be. I’m going to do what he couldn’t do, Maichu. Seiryuu no Miko is here, and I believe in her. Somehow… I’m going to help Hikari save Kutou.”

Chapter 11

Chapter Ten

“Well, my Shadow of the West. And what do you have to report to me today?”

As Miramu slipped neatly into the shrine of Seiryuu, he found that the priest was already awaiting him, his arms folded in his voluminous sleeves as he fixed the assassin with a beady, thoughtful look. “Your return here was not as swift as I anticipated — could it be that you got distracted along the way?”

“Distracted?” Miramu frowned, meeting Kikei’s gaze with a reproving one of his own. “You must be joking. What could get in my way, Lord Priest? Or do you not have faith in the people you send to carry out your dirty work? Have you lost courage in us now that things have become more dangerous?”

“You suggest I am becoming cowardly, when I am merely expressing concern for your delay.” Kikei said mildly. “It would not do if something had befallen you, my friend — you should know how valuable you are to me.”

“Friend is not a word you should use.” Miramu shook his head, his thick braid of dark hair swinging over his shoulder as he did so. “And particularly not towards someone like me. I am a shadow, or had you forgotten that fact?”

He brushed his finger over the leather collar at his throat, touching the red character for ‘*kage*’ as he did so.

“Or do you not remember what this signifies, Kikei-sama?”

“Unlike my Emperor’s Meihi favourite, I am well cognisant of *all* my letters, Miramu.” Kikei said softly. “On which subject, I hope you have a report to make.”

“On Hyoushin, Lord Priest? Or on your writing prowess?” Miramu asked facetiously, and Kikei frowned.

“You are not as amusing as you think you are, you know.”

“I don’t intend to be amusing at all.” Miramu shook his head. “Men with poisoned barbs aren’t exactly natural comedians, after all. As for the Meihi, you need not concern yourself with him again. The poison

with which I shot him has no known antidote. He is no longer your problem."

"Ah." A smile touched Kikei's lips, the beady black eyes softening somewhat in relief at the assassin's words, and inwardly Miramu decided it would be better to omit the exact details of his assault on Hyoushin. "That is more like the Miramu I know. Good. I am glad to hear it. He has been a thorn in my side for entirely too long… and removing thorns, though painful for a brief instant… has immeasurable long term relief. Don't you think so?"

"I wouldn't know about that." Miramu said quietly. "I don't recall any such thorns ever being removed from my body, Kikei-sama."

"Are we becoming cryptic, all of a sudden?" Kikei raised his eyebrow. "What thorns would you like removing, Miramu? I thought that the death of the Meihi would please you. Am I mistaken?"

"Please me?" Miramu sighed, shrugging his shoulders carelessly. "No. Perhaps in the end I'm disappointed. I hoped his death would be one I'd actually feel something for — enjoyment, pleasure, or even pain… any would have done. But in the end, it was quite a boring routine. Just work. A let down, after all."

"I suppose there's little enjoyment in killing a man whose soul has already left this plane of existence." Kikei reflected. He nodded. "Very well. Work though it may have been, Miramu, I am pleased. You have done well."

"There is something else, Kikei."

"Something else?" Kikei looked startled. "Of what nature? Don't tell me you've begun to work outside of your brief — without promise of payment due?"

"Suzaku no Shinzahou." Miramu ignored the Priest's jibe, facing him seriously. "I know its location and its nature, for I've seen it with my own eyes."

"*Seen*… it?" Kikei's eyes widened with shock, then excitement. "You speak the truth? You have truly discovered Suzaku's Shinzahou?"

"By chance, it seems I have." Miramu nodded, perching on the edge of the dais and leaning up against the leg of the golden dragon statue as he did so. "The irony of it is that it was the Meihi who first guided me in that direction. I learnt something from him before I struck him, it seems. He appears to have travelled straight to its location — well, perhaps he *was* a traitor after all."

“That would be the ultimate irony, would it not?” Kikei chuckled appreciatively. “So, the ghost knew the location of the Phoenix’s treasure, did he? And this he disclosed to you?”

“No… to the boy. Aoiketsu.” Miramu shook his head. “I just happened to overhear them talking.”

“So Aoiketsu is involved, now?” Kikei asked, and Miramu shrugged.

“He saw me strike down his Commander, if that’s what you mean.” He responded. “More than that I couldn’t tell you. He’s an idealistic dreamer, after all — perhaps he is. No doubt Hyoushin’s death will affect him, however… do you think he is a threat to you now, after telling me he was not?”

“I am not afraid of children with big ideas.” Kikei shook his head. “Neither he nor Shi Maichu concern me so much as the information you claim to have discovered. If they return to Kutou, I will have them killed quite easily — you are not the only weapon in my pay, and at court, such things are easy. Do not play with me, Miramu. I want to know about the Shinzahou.”

“And I want to know your true aim, Lord Priest.” Miramu said evenly. “Isn’t it about time you cast some light on that? I’ve helped you in countless ways since I first came to Kutou. You at least owe me a little more information. So I’ll make a trade with you. You tell me what it is you seek to do — and I’ll give you what I know about Suzaku’s treasure.”

“A bargain, is it?” Kikei’s gaze became thoughtful. “I should know better than to underestimate your intelligence, shouldn’t I?”

“Without doubt.” Miramu smiled humourlessly. “An assassin has nothing but his wits to protect him, after all.”

He cocked his head on one side, eying his companion quizzically.

“Well?”

“I suppose that it is a fair offer.” Kikei agreed cautiously. “Though what benefit the knowledge has for you I don’t know. My aim is simply this, Miramu. To harness the magic of the four Gods who claim protection over this Earth — and bring them into one source through which I will be able to finally take hold.”

“To take the magic of the Gods… and use it to dominate.” Miramu repeated slowly. “Predictable, isn’t it? And yet, ambitious, too. Don’t you need something to unlock that power? You’re not capable, are you, of releasing that magic on your own?”

“This has troubled me, also.” Kikei admitted. “Until I heard Suiko’s prediction and realised there was a way, after all.”

“Suiko’s…?” Miramu frowned. “What do you mean?”

“If the four Shinzahou are united in Kutou, Seiryuu no Miko will appear.” Kikei said simply. “And when that happens, Miramu, I have my tool. My vessel. It’s well known that Hongou Yui was devoured by the dragon God Seiryuu on her last visit, and only the wish of Suzaku no Miko saved her from disappearing into oblivion. The Miko’s fate is to be consumed, after all — Suzaku’s Priestess intervened and so Seiryuu’s work was never fully completed. Seiryuu’s Miko is a sacrifice and I will use her just that way… to summon the Gods, and then be devoured by them. That is all.”

“Seiryuu no Miko, huh.” Miramu’s eyes narrowed as he remembered Hyoushin’s words in the forest. “And you believe in something predicted by that air-headed witch?”

“She is not unreliable when it comes to matters of Seiryuu.” Kikei responded. “I believe the Miko will come when we bring the last Shinzahou to Kutou. And then I will find a way to manipulate her, just as I manipulate Kayu and the Emperor. She will be nothing but a young girl, after all. Didn’t Nakago manipulate the thoughts and feelings of Hongou Yui, eighteen years ago? From the shadows I watched him toy with her, turning her from an intelligent girl into a resentful, hating child. Those from the Miko’s world appear foolish. It can’t be difficult to twist such a credulous, naïve creature into doing my bidding.”

“And what of the Seishi who guard the Miko, Kikei?”

“Seiryuu’s Seishi are conveniently dead.” Kikei said frankly. “With one exception, and I am not concerned about a boy who ran from war into exile. There are no Seishi to worry about.”

“I heard a legend, once, about Seishi spirits rising from the dead to defend their Priestess.” Miramu remarked off-handedly. “Or don’t you believe in ghosts?”

“Believe me, Miramu, I have taken that into account, also.” Kikei’s eyes glittered with something that bordered on amusement. “It is not a problem. Trust me. I am not expecting interference from anyone of Celestial birth.”

He folded his hands together, offering the assassin a smile.

“Well?” He prompted. “And now it’s your turn. What have you learnt about Suzaku no Shinzahou?”

Miramu hesitated for a moment, absorbing the Priest's words as he carefully went over them in his head.

"There's still something missing from that explanation." He realised. "How can he guarantee that no Celestial Warrior will step forth to defend the Miko? Why is he so sure of himself… I don't understand. But if that's how he wants it — so be it. It's not my concern, anyway — I've never accepted being Amefuri, and I've definitely no interest in defending any Miko, especially not one belonging to another God. Even so, though, he didn't give me the whole truth. And two can play that game, Lord Priest. If that's how you want it — I can take the same tack."

"Miramu?" Kikei pressed, and Miramu smiled, shrugging his shoulders.

"Sukunami Hikari is the one who has the Shinzahou." He said lightly. "She is its protector — its guardian — and the one they flock to in Kounan for this reason. That is the secret she has kept so ably from Kintsusei-sama's spies, Kikei-sama. If you want the treasure — it is she you must go to in order to find it."

"And if I was to ask you to go there and retrieve it from her custody for me?"

"I cannot." Miramu shook his head, and Kikei's eyes narrowed.

"Cannot? Or will not?"

"Both. Either. You choose… I don't mind." Miramu shrugged carelessly once more. "I have no intention of going back to Kounan, that's all. If you want to speak to the girl so badly, you must make other plans."

"I assume there is a reason for this sudden defiance?"

"Yes, there's a reason." Miramu's expression became sober. "Kikei, Toroki is in the south. You and I, we had an accord regarding her. I will not face her again. I have done so too many times already. My life is in danger from her whenever I see her — I will not take that risk again. So long as Toroki is in Kounan — I will not be. That is all."

"Toroki again." Kikei sighed. "For a man of such ability and sense, you have bizarre superstitions sometimes."

"We all have our flaws." Miramu spread his hands. "Even so, you won't change my mind. I won't go, Kikei. Send someone else, if you care so much about it. How about that boy of yours? He's obedient enough a puppet for this — don't you think?"

“Kayu?” The priest’s eyes widened, then he frowned. “I should send a young idiot into potential danger — that’s what you think?”

“That young idiot is someone you owe a lot to already.” Miramu said candidly. “Without his help, Hyoushin would still be a thorn in your side. Besides, he is obedient to you — unlike the troublesome Shadow of the West. You should utilise that while you can. Send Kayu to Kounan… send him to find the Shinzahou. After all, he cares about Kutou. I, on the other hand, am only involved with you for financial gain.”

“Sometimes that makes it easier.” Kikei admitted, but he sighed, nodding his head. “Very well. I shall follow your advice and send Kayu. I will go now and speak to the Emperor — such a mission is better with his backing, after all. You have done well in ridding me of Hyoushin, else I would be more vexed with you — but I suppose it is as you say. Even the best tools have their flaws.”

With that he was gone, the door of the shrine swinging shut behind him, and Miramu leant back against the dragon statue, raising his head to stare into the piercing azure eyes that glared down at him below. They almost seemed to be accusing him, and a wry smile touched the assassin’s lips as slowly he nodded his head in acknowledgement.

“Your Miko’s in trouble now, isn’t she?” He murmured. “If Hyoushin was right… maybe he was.”

He sighed, stretching his arms out in front of him as he eyed his black-gloved hands in distaste.

“Another life taken, I suppose.” He murmured. “Dead or alive, that Meihi made ripples and they haven’t yet calmed. Yet if he was right about that girl… I wonder. Could she really be Seiryuu’s Miko and Suzaku’s treasure? Is such a thing even possible? And was I wrong to conceal from Kikei the fact that the Shinzahou and the girl are one and the same thing?”

He mused on this for a moment, then shook his head.

“I do not trust Kikei, even if he is paying me.” He decided. “No. It is always best to have an ace up my sleeve — besides, if Kayu goes to Kounan, no doubt he will discover enough to keep that fat old man happy. Perhaps, if he manages to bring his Miko here — he’ll find she’s not so easy to manipulate as he thinks. Sukunami Hikari is not so naïve nor so credulous as a stranger flung into this world — rather has she faced me with defiance on two occasions, and Suzaku’s soul burns strongly within her. This could even be interesting — either way, I

anticipate something of a show beginning from this point on. I'll have to be careful to make sure I don't miss getting a front row seat!"

"That should be enough water for now."

Shishi set down her pail with a sigh, casting Meikyo a rueful grin as she leant up against the cool stone of the well. "No kidding when you said you needed a lot, chibi — I guess it doesn't help with it being the middle of the summer, either, huh?"

"It totally doesn't." Meikyo shook her head, thick red hair flying as she did so. "Thanks for helping me, Shishi. You too, Hikari-neechan. Now there should be enough for Papa's patient and for anything else."

"It's a heavy job for you, isn't it?" Hikari eyed the small girl pensively, and Meikyo shrugged.

"I like helping." She admitted. "But sometimes it is. Papa says I'll grow into it — but I don't seem to be doing it all that quickly."

She sighed, spreading her hands.

"I guess that maybe Suzaku wants me to be small." She added matter-of-factly. "But it doesn't help when it comes to pulling water or helping Kaa-san in the kitchen."

Despite herself Shishi laughed, ruffling the tousled red hair playfully.

"That's one way of looking at it, I guess." She remarked. "But as it happens, I don't mind helping out today. I think… I'm better off here than going back to the mountain for a while."

"Are you in trouble or something?" Meikyo's ruby eyes widened in surprise. "Is Uncle Wolf angry, Shishi?"

"Probably." Shishi admitted. "Or he will be, when he finds out."

"What did you *do*?" Meikyo demanded.

"It's complicated." Shishi shook her head. "Don't you worry about it, Mei-chan. It's nothing so very bad. Just mountain stuff. That's all."

"Mountain stuff, huh?" Meikyo looked thoughtful. Then she sighed, casting Hikari a quizzical glance.

"Hikari-neechan, do *you* know the Tenshi-san who Papa brought back to the farmhouse?"

"The… Tenshi… san?" Hikari echoed, and Meikyo nodded.

“Yes. The man… I think… his name is… Hyou… shin-san?”

“Hyoushin?” Hikari’s expression cleared. “Sort of. I guess you could say he was Aoi’s adoptive father, in a manner of speaking. I’m sorry, Mei-chan — I didn’t realise you meant him. I hadn’t thought of him… as an angel.”

“He looks like an angel to me.” Meikyo admitted. “I never saw anyone so beautiful before. I took water to Papa and Myoume-neesan and he looked like that, sleeping in the back room. Don’t you think so? He’s like an angel, with silver hair and pale skin. So I guess I just called him Tenshi-san because it’s easier to remember.”

“I suppose so.” Hikari admitted, and Shishi snorted.

“I wouldn’t call him that.” She responded. “However he looks, Meikyo, he’s still just a man like any other man. You know that, right?”

“I know.” Meikyo nodded composedly. “Papa said so. Besides, angels can’t get hurt or sick, can they? So I know he’s not really sent by Suzaku or one of the Gods. But I still think he’s beautiful, Shishi. Even if he isn’t really an angel.”

“I suppose he is, in a strange kind of way.” Hikari reflected, and Shishi gave her a sharp nudge.

“That’s Aoi’s surrogate father you’re talking about.” She warned, a flicker of mischief in her bronze eyes. “Be careful — someone might get the wrong idea.”

“Shishi, shut up.” Hikari pinkened. “It’s not like that.”

“Does Hikari-neechan love Aoi-nii, then?” Meikyo asked innocently, and Hikari’s flush deepened as she stared at the young girl in dismay.

“What makes you say something like that, Mei-chan?” She managed at length, and Meikyo shrugged.

“Because he looks at you and you look at him and sometimes when you think noone is watching you you touch hands and stuff.” She said frankly. “That’s all. I asked Kaa-san about it, and she said that it was because you two liked each other. So you must do — mustn’t you?”

“Even the chibi members of the family are cluing into it now, Hiki.” Shishi said teasingly. “You can’t really deny it, can you?”

“Well, it was strange to me at first.” Meikyo said seriously. “Though I think it’s nice too, of course, because I like Aoi-nii and I like Hikari-neechan a lot too. But you never do those things with anyone, Shishi

— so I wasn't sure about it. I guess you're just not in love with anyone, huh?"

"Decidedly not." Shishi shook her head. "I've no interest in all that mushy crap."

"Kaa-san says you'll probably never be tamed enough to marry." Meikyo reflected. "What do you think she meant by that? I didn't understand."

"Aidou-obasama did?" Shishi stared, colour rising in her cheeks. "Damn, as if I wanted to be 'tamed' as she put it! I'm a lion cub, dammit, not a house cat. She shouldn't even think about it — I'm not planning on getting married to anyone, so why would I care about that?"

"Then calm down, stupid." Hikari sent her a playful glance. "Because you're giving the exact opposite impression, reacting like that."

"You're the one who's stupid, if you think that." Shishi shook her head. "I'm not interested in men or marriage or anything like that. That's what Obasama means, Meikyo. That I don't want to get married. And she's right. I don't."

"I think it'd be lonely, not to get married." Meikyo said thoughtfully. "One day I'd like to, when I'm old enough. Then I can have a family of my own, and that would be nice. I can teach them to read and write, like Papa teaches Eiju and me. And all kinds of other things, too. Having a family's an important thing. Don't you think so, Hikari-neechan?"

"Yes." Hikari hesitated for a moment, then she nodded her head. "Very important."

Shishi saw her friend's gaze dart back towards the farm building, and she knew that the other girl was thinking about the injured Meihi. She frowned, grabbing her by the arm.

"Don't." She murmured. "Aoi's strong and he'll deal with it, whatever happens. And Chichiri's not an idiot. Besides, Hyoushin's not exactly our ally, is he? We shouldn't get all choked up about him being hurt."

"He's still a person and he's still suffering." Hikari shook her head. "Besides, he came to us looking for help. Maichu said as much. You trusted in him — so let's try and trust in Hyoushin, too. For Aoi's sake, Shishi — please, let's try."

“All right.” Shishi sighed heavily, nodding her head. “I guess in those terms… I see your point. But even so, Hiki — there’s no point in fretting about something we have no power to change.”

“There you girls are.” Before Hikari could respond, Chichiri’s voice cut across their conversation and both turned to see the sorcerer crossing the grass towards them. His expression was tired and uncharacteristic preoccupation lurked in his ruby gaze, darkening the colour of his remaining eye and making him appear suddenly older. At the sight of him, Meikyo let out a yell, running forward to grab her father by the hands.

“Papa! Shishi and Hikari-neechan and I pulled lots of water — is the Tenshi-san any better now?”

“Well, he’s sleeping, still.” Chichiri sighed, shrugging his shoulders. “His fever isn’t improving, and I think we’re in for a rough day and night, too. Shishi, I’m glad you’re still here, because I have a favour to ask of you.”

“A favour?” Shishi looked startled. “What kind of favour?”

“I’d like to speak to your father, but I don’t really want to leave the farm.” Chichiri explained. “Hyoushin’s condition is… uncertain and though Myoume and I have discussed the idea of calling a proper physician from the city, we both realise it’s impossible. To do that would be to give people word that Hyoushin was here and still alive — and we don’t need to attract that kind of attention to the village. That being the case… will you go to Reikaku-zan on my behalf, and ask Tasuki to come down and see me as soon as he possibly can?”

“Papa?” Shishi faltered, and Chichiri eyed her keenly.

“Something wrong?”

“No…” Shishi sighed. “No. I’ll go. It’s just… well, I haven’t spoken to him since I let Maichu out of the mountain prison this morning and I think he might be a bit pissed with me, to be quite honest.”

“Well, if it’s any consolation, I think Maichu’s being here is a good thing.” Chichiri said reassuringly. “It meant Aoi was saved a ride that I’m not sure he was fit to make — and now the boy is here, we can see what we can do about keeping him safe from harm, too. Toroki’s predictions haven’t just centred on the tribal traitor, after all. She reminded me herself of that earlier on.”

“She *did* say something would happen to Maichu if he was in Kounan.” Hikari’s eyes widened. “That’s why Aoi told him to go North and to Hokkan… to meet up with Hyoushin and the other soldiers. But

now Maichu's back in Kounan again… is he in danger here?"

"We don't know, yet." Chichiri admitted. "But considering Hyoushin's predicament, it can't be ruled out that there may be a contract on Maichu's life, too."

"Is it really okay, then? Him being here?" Hikari asked. Chichiri nodded.

"I'd rather he was, for now. For Aoi's sake as well as his own." He responded. "Don't worry, Hikari. Anywhere's as safe as anywhere else, after all."

"I'd better go speak to Papa, then." Shishi said with a frown. "Hiki, if and when Aoi and his idiot buddy come outside, make sure Maichu washes or something, will you? Because I promised Aidou-obasama he wouldn't get mountain dust over everything and I'd rather only be in the shit with one member of the Kou family today, if it's okay with everyone else."

"Don't worry. I'll tell him." Hikari promised. "Although if he's met Aidou-san, I doubt he'll be in any mood to upset her."

"You make my wife sound like some kind of demon." Despite himself, Chichiri's gaze glittered faintly with amusement, and Shishi shrugged.

"Not a demon." She said carefully. "But when it comes to chores and manners and stuff, she can be pretty close. I'll see you guys later, if I survive my encounter with the Kashira — I'll bring Papa back with me with any luck, so don't eat lunch till we arrive. Okay? After all that water pulling, I expect to be fed! After all, Maichu may have got some of Obasama's breakfast — but I came out here to help Mei-chan, so I'm pretty hungry!"

With that she was gone, hurrying through the rows of neatly weeded herbs towards the wooden arch that led out into the centre of the village. A few of the local residents called greetings to her as she passed and she raised her hand in a wave as she recognised each in turn. Although she had grown up on the mountain, she had spent enough of her childhood dotting between Reikaku-zan, Souun and the village inhabited by the Ri branch of her family, and as she walked she felt a flicker of nostalgia flare up inside her heart.

"Lots of things I didn't know, then." She mused, slipping her hands into the folds of her shirt as she sauntered in the direction of the mountain path. "I used to come here with Jin and take it for granted we'd do that forever — every winter when we'd bring stuff down from

the mountains to help Chichiri and Aidou-obasama provide for the villagers who needed it — all the jokes he'd make about the next year's lot being even better. This time there is no next year. This is the end of that road."

"*You seem melancholy, Shishi.*"

Doryoku's voice echoed softly in her ear, and Shishi sighed, shaking her head.

"Nostalgic is a better word." She responded. "Sorry, Do-nee. I wasn't really talking to you as such — just thinking."

"*Am I intruding?*" Doryoku sounded anxious, and despite herself Shishi smiled.

"By eavesdropping on my thoughts without permission?" She responded. "No… I suppose not. It's all right. Just for a moment I'd forgotten. Walking through this village is something I've done a thousand times. But it hasn't ever felt quite as strange as this. I've got you, now. Jin is dead. Hiki's here. Everything's different from how it was last summer."

She shrugged, stretching her hands over her head as she glanced up at the clear blue sky.

"I'm fifteen in a few days." She added. "I think, anyway — I saw Shishiza's stars last night, so I'm sure that it can't be far away. I just feel a lot different from how I did last summer, I suppose. Last summer I was only concerned about the mountain and getting strong enough to be Kashira. And now… I think it's not like that at all. I do want that still, of course. But I've sort of realised that being Kashira would mean Papa wouldn't be there any more. Till I lost Jin, I didn't realise how awful losing someone felt. So maybe I'm not in so much of a hurry to do that now. Who knows, huh?"

"*We're going to Reikaku-zan to see your father now, aren't we*?" Doryoku asked, and Shishi nodded.

"Do-nee, I'd like your opinion." She said seriously. "About Hyoushin — about the fact we're helping him now. After all, when we were in Hokkan, you used my body and you stopped us from taking the Shinzahou from that man."

"*I'm sorry I did that, Shishi. I wasn't trying to hurt you.*"

"I know." Shishi nodded. "That wasn't what I meant. Really, what it is is that I want to know… is just what you think about him."

"*About Hyoushin*?" Doryoku seemed surprised. "*But I built that*

judgement based on Bakaru's feelings. Not on Hyoushin's. I do not know this Meihi. But I trust in Bakaru because he is Bachisu's brother and a man of Genbu. His heart and motives I can read very plainly. He believed in Hyoushin enough to give him the treasure, Shishi. So for that reason, I kept faith and did not intervene."

"But Hyoushin doesn't have the Shinzahou now." Shishi sighed. "Maichu hasn't said as much, but I guess when he was kicked out, they took it from him instead."

"*So it would seem*." Doryoku sounded troubled. "*Genbu no Shinzahou is now in the East. I can feel that — it has reached Kutou. But Hyoushin is here*."

"You really think Bakaru's judgement was okay, when he gave that thing to Hyoushin, though?" Shishi asked. "I mean, you think that means we can trust him… if he survives enough for us to ask? Because he's from Kutou, like Maichu and Aoi. So…"

"*You trust in Aoiketsu, don't you*?"

"Yes, I do." Shishi looked startled. "Even though he's an idiot, I guess I understand where he's coming from pretty well."

"*And Maichu? Him too, now*?"

"Funnily enough, yes." Shishi admitted. "He doesn't seem like… the sort of person who could lie to you for very long. Does he?"

"*No, he does not*." Doryoku's tones were thoughtful. "*If they are from Kutou also, and they trust in this man, why do you not? Do you hold him responsible for Jin's death, perhaps*?"

Shishi started at this. Then she sighed, shaking her head.

"That was… Miramu. Not Hyoushin." She said at length. "I guess you have a point. All right. I'll try and follow your train of thought and believe in Hyoushin not being our enemy. After all, Miramu attacked *him* too, so that's a pretty good indication they're not on the same side. And I don't want that bastard assassin to kill anyone else, no matter who they are. Aoi's pretty messed up over this and because he is, Hiki is too. It's gloomy and depressing if someone else dies. So I guess… I guess I'll just try and trust that he came here with a will to help us after all."

"*I think that is likely*." Doryoku reflected. "*I do not know this man, Shishi, but I do know the ways and the spirit of the Meihi. And this man had that spirit deep within his eyes, when we faced him in the temple in Hokkan. I saw it there, burning far inside of him when he spoke about his*

tribe and how their word was their bond. It is the same resolution and faith that Bachisu always had. Whatever he has become, Hyoushin is still a Meihi. And the Meihi are honourable — even unto death. Whatever errand brought Hyoushin to Kounan, I think you can trust in his motives. Bakaru did, and so will I."

"It's sort of comforting to hear you say it like that." Shishi admitted. "I guess having you around is more useful than I thought."

"*Does that mean you're not mad at me any more*?" Doryoku asked hesitantly.

"Who said I was mad at you anyway?" Shishi was surprised.

"*I was reading your thoughts without you asking me to*." Doryoku sounded penitent, and Shishi sighed, shaking her head.

"Forget it. It's not important." She said with a careless flick of her fingers. "Now pipe down, will you? We're at Reikaku-zan and if people see me talking to myself, they'll think I've finally flipped out."

"*All right.*" Doryoku sounded relieved. "*I'll do that, Shishi. Thank you.*"

"Well, if it isn't the cub."

As Shishi reached the bandit's central base, the sound of Kouji's voice made her turn and she paused, offering the older man a rueful smile as she registered the expression on his face. At the sign of her hesitation, Kouji grinned, slowly shaking his head as he came to clap a heavy hand down on her shoulder.

"Genrou's been looking for you all over the place." He said softly. "A little bit over-ambitious, don't you think? Setting free a prisoner without his say-so?"

"It's not quite like that." Shishi said carefully. "But I need to speak to him anyway, so I better get it over with. Where is he, Aniue? Is he inside?"

"He's walked out to Jin's memorial. I think he thought you might go there." Kouji shook his head. "He's not real pleased with you, kiddo. It's not like you to do something so wholesale an' disregard mountain security, so I hope you have a good reason."

"Yeah, I guess I do." Shishi nodded. "I just don't know if he'll understand it."

She sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

"Oh well. If he's there, that's where I'll go." She added. "Thanks,

Aniue. I know it was a crazy thing to do, but really, I kind of had to… so I hope he'll realise that, when I try to explain."

"Well, he can be thick in the head, sometimes." Kouji rubbed his chin pensively. "But he's pretty fond of you, so I'm sure he'll hear you out at the very least. Chin up, huh? I'm sure if you had a good reason, he'll calm down."

"Here's hoping." Shishi murmured. "I'll see you later, Aniue — providing there's any of me left to see!"

With that she darted off into the surrounding woodland, taking the now familiar and worn pathway up to the level where her adoptive brother's remains had been carefully interred within the white stone tomb. As she reached the clearing she paused, swallowing hard as she registered her father's shadow against the paleness of the burial wall, and from the tension in his stocky frame she realised that Kouji had not been exaggerating.

"He's pissed." She murmured. "Dammit… but even so, Chichiri said I did the right thing, and Maichu doesn't seem like he's a threat. I don't think he could tell a convincing lie if his life depended on it — I just have to make Kashira understand the things I do, that's all."

She took a hesitant step forward, and at the sound the bandit leader turned, gazing at her for a moment with an unreadable expression in his bronze eyes. Shishi bit her lip, registering the suppressed anger flickering in the depths of his gaze, and she knew her father was only just keeping a hold on his legendary, fiery temper.

She swallowed hard, forcing herself to take another step towards him.

"A… Aniue said you were looking for me." She murmured, as the silence threatened to grow oppressive. "An' Chichiri asked me to come see you anyway. He wants you in the village, as soon as possible."

"Chichiri, huh." Tasuki's lips thinned, the tip of a fanged tooth protruding as he surveyed her. "So that's where you've been? The Eastern Village?"

"Yes."

There was a further silence, then Tasuki clenched his fist, banging it down against the cold hard wall of Jin's tomb as he did so.

"Dammit, Shishi, what the hell were you playing at?" He demanded, and Shishi's eyes widened at the sudden burst of temper. "I know it was you, so don't pretend to me that it wasn't. That kid was

locked up firm as could be last night an' suddenly this mornin' he's nowhere to be found. Shit, kid, don't you understand that he's from Kutou? Dammit, from the same country that killed Jin?"

"Kutou didn't kill Jin. *Miramu* did." Shishi gathered her courage, shaking her head resolutely. "Maichu's a friend of Aoi's. He told us that himself and Aoi's confirmed it. He's not our enemy, Papa. He's…"

"He's a soldier from Kutou who may just as well have been a spy." Tasuki snapped, and despite herself Shishi faltered, unused to having the full force of her father's fury directed at her. And yet, she realised, deep within that anger was a flicker of fear, and with a jolt she registered the fact that he had been worried about her.

"Maichu's not a spy." She managed. "He's not, Papa. He's here to help Aoi. It's not what you think it is. You don't understand."

"Well, it'd be damn nice if people would run things by me before making decisions about what I do and don't understand." Tasuki responded sharply. "Shit, Shishi, that boy was a trained fighter. He could've hurt you — do you realise that? An' to get him out of the mountain, you must've used the passages. What if he comes back looking for the relic? He could put others in danger too — or don't you understand that this is your home an' not just some fortress other people can't get into?"

"I told you, Maichu's *not* a spy!"

"And *I* told *you*, those decisions are mine to make, not yours!" Tasuki countered. "I'm still Kashira here, you know. Even if one day you want to wield the tessen — right now this is still *my* mountain an' I still decide what goes on here! You're still a kid, Shishi. You're takin' stupid risks!"

"Like *you* never did anything risky when you were protecting Miaka-sama?" Despite herself, Shishi's indignation flared up at this. "I know you did, because I've heard the stories from Okaa-san and from Chichiri. So don't be hypocritical about it! I did what I thought was the right thing to do — you know full well that if you'd been me, you'd have followed your instincts, too! Everyone says we're alike — you should realise better than anyone why I took a chance on Maichu and let him go!"

"That's a different thing completely." Tasuki shook his head impatiently. "I'm one of Suzaku's people. I'm stronger'n you an' riskin' my life for the Miko is part of bein' a Seishi. Protectin' Miaka was important, after all. It's not the same situation at all."

“It is! It is too!” Shishi protested. “Dammit, Papa, why won’t you *listen* to me?”

“When you talk sense, I’ll listen.” Tasuki retorted. “Right now you’re babblin’ rubbish an’ it doesn’t justify your breakin’ rules so wholesale at all.”

“Do you really think you’re the only member of the Kou family who’s allowed to go throw himself into danger or to make decisions about things, Papa?” Shishi demanded. “You *don’t* understand — you really don’t. Everything that’s happening is bigger than you realise — it’s much bigger, and it’s going to get more so as we go on. We can’t turn back — any of us. Not now. Jin… Jin even died for this, and you know, it might happen that others of us will die too, before it’s over. But that’s how it’s going to be, so that’s what we’re going to do.”

“Shishi, what the hell are you…”

“Listen, *you* protected Miaka-sama.” Shishi cut across him, holding up her hands as she did so. “You did so and you survived, even though you lost friends along the way. But this isn’t about Suzaku no Miko, Papa. Miaka-sama isn’t in Kounan now. This is about *Hikari*. And you’re not Hiki’s guardian. You’re Miaka-sama’s. Hikari’s not the same thing at all. And Suzaku, Seiryuu, Byakko… Genbu, they all chose us to protect her in the same way. She’s the only one that can save this world and even if I don’t know how she can do that yet, I’m willing to do whatever the hell I can to make sure she succeeds. Because I’m one of *her* guardians, Papa. Whether you like it or not — whether I’m a Seishi or not — that’s how it is. I’m here to protect Hiki and do what’s right for Kounan… even if it means disobeying you. Maichu’s not our enemy, and nor is Kutou. You don’t understand a thing about it — and I’m fed up with you not taking me seriously enough to think I can take care of myself! I’m not a little kid now — I’m fifteen soon. And shit, I’m old enough to decide for myself when something’s right or wrong!”

Frustration bubbled up inside of her, and even as it did so, she felt a flicker of Doryoku’s spirit curling around her heart. She let out a gasp as the ground suddenly shook beneath their feet, her eyes widening with horror and dismay as a thin crack began to zig-zag its way across the ground towards the stunned bandit Kashira.

“Shit, Doryoku, stop it!” She exclaimed. “Stop acting on my emotions! Just because I’m pissed — I don’t want to attack him! Shit, he’s my father — calm down!”

“Shi… shi?” Tasuki stared at his only child, the wind taken

completely from his sails as he struggled to understand what had just happened. Shishi rubbed her temples, feeling the agitated energy of the mage spirit pulsing against her own unsettled emotions as she struggled to bring her thoughts back into some semblance of order. Doryoku's reaction had been instinctive, she realised that — that the mage's magic had truly meshed with her own thoughts and feelings now and that the sudden show of temper had almost brought an earthquake to the slopes of Reikaku-zan.

"*I* need to calm down too, huh." She murmured softly. "Dammit, I need to get this in check."

"What the hell did you just do?" Tasuki found his voice at that moment, grasping his daughter by the shoulders and giving her a little shake as he met her gaze with an anxious one of his own. As Shishi stared at him, she realised his anger had evaporated and that a mixture of fear and worry clouded his bronze eyes. She sighed, slowly shaking her head.

"I wasn't exactly going to tell you… yet." She admitted. "But I guess now it can't be helped. Something sort of happened in Hokkan, Papa. And I… I'm not quite the same way as I was before I left."

"What do you mean, something happened?" Tasuki eyed her suspiciously, and Shishi held up her right arm, running her finger absently over the black shell bracelet as it glittered faintly with silver light.

"This is Genbu's relic." She said carefully. "It's carved from his shell and we retrieved it when we went North. We met an old Meihi — one whose life you saved in an Eastern circus seven years ago. He remembered me — and you — and because he was dying, he asked me to find the relic and take care of it for him. He said she'd be able to lead us to the Shinzahou, so I agreed. We tracked it down in the mountains between Hokkan and Kounan, but the only way to use it was for me to actually put it on. When I did, I was able to wake Genbu's mage, Doryoku."

"Doryoku?"

"Yeah." Shishi nodded. "The only thing is, though, that Doryoku really doesn't like being on her own. She hates being abandoned, so she's sort of hooked herself into me. She says that now we're linked — because I agreed to protect her, I've become her guardian in the Meihi's place. And that means we're connected. Through my blood — she can talk to me, and also give me her magic. Even when… I don't really want it."

She sighed, suddenly feeling tired.

“She’s kinda susceptible to my feelings, too.” She admitted. “I didn’t mean to freak out and crack the ground like that… I’m sorry. I haven’t quite got the hang of keeping her or her magic in check yet.”

“This thing *possessed* you?” Tasuki’s eyes widened with horror, and Shishi shrugged.

“It ain’t quite like that.” She responded. “Doryoku’s not a bad spirit, Papa. She only wants to help. I’m just not strong enough yet to really understand how to use this connection properly. But I will be. And I’ll use it to help Hiki, so it’ll be all right in the end. Even though we didn’t get the Shinzahou from Hokkan — I think when we go to Kutou, I’ll be ready and prepared.”

“Shit.” Tasuki sank down on a nearby rock, staring at his daughter as if seeing her for the first time. “What the hell is going on here, kid? You say I don’t understand — I think it’s about time you explained everything to me so as I do. This kid you let free — you really believe in him, huh?”

“I believe in Aoi.” Shishi replied. “And Maichu’s Aoi’s friend.”

“Even though that Aoi kid spied for Kutou?”

“Yes.” Shishi nodded. “The thing is, Papa… Kutou are the country in the shit at the moment. Not Kounan — that’s just a knock on consequence. Aoi came here for that reason. And when I thought about it, I realised that I’d take risks and sneak around if I had to to help Kounan survive… so I’m not really mad at him for that. Besides… Papa, he helped to rescue me from the circus owners when I met the Meihi. He fought someone and killed him coming to my rescue. Given that — of course I trust him.”

“He did, huh?” Tasuki rubbed his chin. “I see.”

“He did.” Shishi agreed. “And it’s got more complicated… Papa, Chichiri wants you in the village. Aoi and Maichu’s Commander Hyoushin was attacked by Miramu in the forest outside the Eastern Village early this morning.”

“Miramu’s in Kounan?” Tasuki’s fingers instinctively flexed towards his tessen, but Shishi shook her head.

“He’s gone, now. Myoume saw him off.” She replied. “But Hyoushin is badly hurt. And Chichiri thinks we should help him. From what Maichu told Aoi, both he and Hyoushin are technically outlaws from Kutou at the moment. There’s some crazy Priest in the East who’s

operating behind the Emperor's back and he's going to do something drastic — get rid of the Gods or something, I don't know — so we don't have time to waste. That's why I went against you this morning. Maichu's from Kutou but in comparison with what we're facing, he's not our enemy. And I think — we all think — that we have to work together somehow. Or it isn't going to work out."

"And that's why you're letting this spirit float around your body like some kind of parasite?"

"I'm all right with it, Papa. I told you. Do-nee wants to help me, and I need her help to be strong enough to protect Hiki from harm."

Tasuki sighed.

"If I'd realised saving that old circus Meihi all those years back would have this kind of consequence I'd have thought twice about it." He admitted, and despite herself, Shishi smiled.

"No you wouldn't." She said confidently. "Even if you had known. Because you're not that kind of person, Papa. You wanted to save him there and then, so you did. And you have Suzaku's strength to help you with things like that. Now, thanks to Bachisu-san and Doryoku, I have some of Genbu's and I'll learn to use it in the same way. You should be proud of that, after all. I'm not a kid, now. I'm almost grown up."

"Shit, I guess you are, aren't you." Tasuki frowned, brushing a finger against her cheek as he eyed her pensively. "Jin's death did that as much as anything, too, didn't it? Havin' to think things out for yourself. I guess I understand that… when Hakurou died, I felt somewhat the same. Jin was a good influence on you, kid — that's for sure. He taught you a lot of things I hadn't even realised that you knew. But I guess… you really ain't just the cub any more. With or without this Genbu magic you've picked up… it's time I stopped and realised that you're almost an adult. You're the same age now, more or less, as your Ma was the first time I met her. And you've got a bit of her stubborn spirit in you too, not just mine."

Shishi shrugged.

"I'm like you, but I'm not you." She said simply. "I'm my own kind of bandit. One day I'll be strong enough to wield your tessen, Papa — but it's not so important to me now as it was before all of this. I mean, I don't want you not to be there, and there are other important things in my life now too."

She tilted her head on one side, eying him thoughtfully.

“Will you come with me back to the village?” She asked. “I told them to make sure there was lunch waiting… and Chichiri did say to come as soon as possible. This Hyoushin guy of Aoi’s is pretty badly injured — I don’t think Chichiri thinks he’ll survive, and I’m almost sure he wants to speak to you about it.”

“Then I guess this time I’m going to lose my wits an’ trust to your judgement on things.” Tasuki said resignedly, reaching across to ruffle his fingers playfully through his daughter’s thick wavy hair. “Your call on the soldier, kid — I’ll respect it an’ leave it at that. After all, if you really are Hikari’s guardian, an’ you really are grown enough to take on that kind of a responsibility… it’s about time I listened to you as well, isn’t it?”

He nodded, as if confirming his decision to himself.

“We’ll go see what Chichiri wants.” He added. “But Shishi, before we do… for the time bein’ I don’t think mentionin’ this Genbu woman to your mother is a good idea. She was pretty worried about you goin’ off the last time, after Jin’s death in Sairou. Let’s not freak her out any more than we have to, huh? I’m sure Chichiri’ll help you figure it out, if he can… so let’s keep it between us for the time bein’…okay?”

“Okay.” Shishi looked relieved. “I’m glad you know, but I think you’re right. Besides, you are involved in all of this too, even if Miaka-sama isn’t here. We came back here to speak to you and Chichiri both about things… specifically about going to Kutou and being strong enough to face whatever’s there. We all know that’s where we have to be, next… but it’s kinda daunting, thinkin’ it through.”

“No kidding.” Tasuki murmured. “But if that’s what Suzaku’s decided…”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Sometimes I think we’re all puppets an’ those Gods just like tweakin’ the strings for their own amusement.” He reflected. “But either way, it’s not like there’s a choice involved. If Genbu’s spirit’s locked into you then you’ll come to understand that more an’ more as time goes on, Shishi. It ain’t the same, bein’ tied to them.”

He cast her a sidelong look.

“I want you to promise me to be careful, when you do go.” He added. “You talkin’ so casually about death an’ sacrifice ain’t somethin’ a father wants to hear. I buried Jin an’ that was hard enough… Shishi, the mountain can’t lose you too. You understand? Your Ma’d never get over it, an’ as for me…”

He trailed off, but from the look in his eyes, Shishi understood the unspoken message between them. She nodded, reaching over to squeeze his hand.

“I’m not going to be killed in Kutou.” She said firmly. “So don’t worry about me. Do-nee’ll help me be strong enough, and I’ll be fine. It’s damn hard to kill Reikaku-zan’s people, after all — and even more so members of the Kou family. I promise, Papa. I’ll be all right.”

“Then there’s nothing more to do but go see what your crazy uncle wants with me this time.” Tasuki sighed. “But your aunt’s cookin’ is as enticin’ a motive as ever, and I’d better hear him out. Though if this Hyoushin guy is really that bad — Suzaku only knows what he expects me to do about it.”

He spread his hands.

“Guess it won’t be solved by wonderin’ over it — Chichiri’s brain works on another level to most people’s anyway.” He decided. “All right, kid. Lead the way. We’re goin’ down to join the party… an’ to find out just exactly what the situation is!”

Chapter 12

Chapter Eleven

The central courtyard of the palace was quiet as Kikei emerged from his quarters, making the short walk across the Imperial complex to the chamber where he knew his Emperor would most likely have secluded himself, working over the suggestions and requests that had been put to him in the morning's council hearings.

As he headed up the steps that led to the Emperor's own private area, he bowed his head towards the guards on duty, offering them a slight smile as he did so.

"Kintsusei-sama is within, I trust? I bring him urgent word and it cannot be delayed."

"Yes, Kikei-sama. I will inform him of your presence, if you would be so good as to wait." The guard nodded, bowing respectfully before withdrawing to carry out his duty. Kikei pursed his lips, his beady gaze flitting across to the other man standing guard outside the Imperial study.

"I have an errand for you also, when your comrade returns." He said softly. "If it is not too much trouble to do the duty of a mere Priest of Seiryuu's Shrine."

"I am sworn to obey those loyal to the Emperor Kintsusei, Kikei-sama." The guard, a young man of no more than sixteen looked startled at being so singled out. "Of course I will obey your command."

"You are a good man, then." Kikei reflected. "Let me ask you something — are you acquainted with the soldier Hei Kayu?"

"Kayu-nii?" The boy stared, then nodded his head. "Yes, sir. I am, sir. Sometimes he's trained with us, before going on the Emperor's business."

"That is what I hoped." Kikei looked approving. "Very well, then you are suitable to help me in this matter. I would like you to go to the barracks and locate Kayu for me. Instruct him to wait for me in the shrine of Seiryuu — I will be with him as soon as I have conducted my business with the Emperor. As you well know, such Imperial business must take precedence — but I need to speak with him on a

matter of some urgency."

"Yes, sir." The soldier nodded, saluting as he did so. "I understand and I will do as you say."

"Good." Kikei's thin lips broke into a wide smile. "You will go far, with an attitude such as that."

"Kikei-sama, the Emperor will see you now." The first guard returned at that moment, bowing respectfully towards the Priest as he did so. "He says you should go right ahead and enter, if it is a matter of such importance."

"Thank you." Kikei acknowledged the gesture with a nod of his own head. "I am indebted to you both."

With that he swept past them and into the Emperor's private annexe, inwardly thinking how easy it was to manipulate gullible young men when under the apparent favour of the current ruling lord.

"Outside of the capital, Kintsusei-sama's hold is less steady, as my machinations have proven." He mused, rubbing his beard pensively as he did so. "But here, at least, there is nothing but loyalty to his Imperial status. At least, outwardly. But till now, Hyoushin has always been here to intervene and tackle those who dared to stray. Now that is no longer the case… I wonder if we shall see the true colours of other ambitious men. Fools, if they wish to put themselves so at risk. This has always been my stronghold, after all. And so long as the Emperor trusts me, I have no need to take drastic action."

"Kikei."

At that moment, he entered the Imperial study, bowing before the younger man as he did so.

"Kintsusei-sama — thank you for seeing me at such short notice." He said softly.

"To be truthful, it is pleasant simply to see the face of someone I can trust." Kintsusei sighed, and as Kikei raised his head, he observed the weary, agitated expression on his Emperor's face. "Truly, Kikei, I feel like I have never been quite so stretched in so many directions. This morning, I learnt that redeployment in the Southern province is proving difficult. The rebel leaders were, I thought, caught and dealt with — but it appears they were just a splinter of the main operation. The insurrection has begun to spread westwards, and I am concerned that it will break over the border into other provinces. Yet when my men ask what I can do about it, I have no answer for them. I feel I am failing their expectations."

“Take courage, my Lord.” Kikei shook his head. “Kutou has always been a difficult country to appease and you have done more than your best over the time I have watched you rule. You should not take it so to heart — the men here all know that this country is the most important thing to you.”

“But they look to me for guidance.” Kintsusei rubbed his temples, as the Priest came fully into the chamber, closing the door behind him. “And all I can think of is the disappearance of three of my men and the uncertainty that faces me now.”

He shook his head as if to clear it, then raised his gaze to meet Kikei’s.

“But you had urgent business with me.” He added. “And I am taking up that time with my complaining. I apologise, Kikei. Please, lay before your Emperor whatever it is you have to say.”

“I fear to trouble you when your spirits are already so at odds.” Kikei schooled his features into an expression of regret. “But following our previous conversation, I have discovered some news which may cause your Highness further distress.”

“Distress?” Kintsusei demanded sharply. “What news? Tell me, Kikei — do not conceal information from your King — whatever it is, I must know!”

Kikei hesitated for a moment, gauging the anxiety that burned deep in his companion’s dark eyes. Then he nodded his head slowly, bringing his hands together in a gesture of prayer as he did so.

“I have received news from the South.” He said softly. “It is now quite definite that Hyoushin — and most likely Maichu as well — have headed in that direction. From what I understand, they headed there with some purpose… in search of something or someone based on information that we have not been given.”

“South…” Kintsusei’s eyes narrowed. “To find Aoiketsu, maybe?”

“I do not know, sire.” Kikei lied, spreading his hands. “But it would seem that Kayu’s observations of treason are starting to bear out. Toroki is a powerful prophet and her visions come true.”

“I won’t believe it.” Kintsusei got to his feet, pacing across his study to the window as he gazed out across the palace complex. “Hyoushin may be Meihi-born, Kikei, and he may not be like other people in his manner or his expression. But he is a good man. An honest man. And I trust in him. Whatever his reasons for going South — I don’t understand what they are. But I will not believe him capable of

treason. Of all men in my company… I could not ever imagine him betraying me."

Kikei sighed, registering the tension in his master's demeanour as he did so.

"Then the final report I have received will trouble you yet further." He said quietly. "Kintsusei-sama, it would seem that Hyoushin reached the south-west of Kounan, with Maichu in his company. From there, the boy has disappeared — I have no knowledge of his whereabouts, nor any indication that either he or Aoiketsu are still even alive. However, what I do know for certain is that Hyoushin himself seems to have fallen foul of mountain bandits. The men of Reikaku-zan are fearsome when antagonised, and they are also protectors of Suzaku's relic. I believe it was this that Hyoushin sought when he went there… and he paid the price for it."

"*No*!" Kintsusei turned sharply, staring at his Priest in horror and dismay. "Kikei, speak plainly — you're not trying to tell me that Hyoushin is…?"

"Killed by the bandits of the south, so it would seem." Kikei's expression became grieved as he nodded his head. "Yes, sire. I… it pains me to bring you this news. But there seems to be no mistake. He was struck down in the south west. I am sorry, Sire. It seems it will now be impossible to bring him before your court in order to discover his true motives."

He flickered his fingers together in a gesture of reverence for a passed soul.

"He must face a different judge now, and explain to him instead." he added devoutly. "He has gone beyond our reach, Heika."

"No…" A strange expression crossed Kintsusei's features, and for a moment Kikei thought that the shock had proven too much for his king to comprehend. Then the man's eyes hardened, and slowly he shook his head.

"This act cannot be forgiven." He said quietly, an uncharacteristic coldness to his words as he turned a resolute gaze on his companion. "If you speak true, Kikei, then this act is beyond justification. Whether he be a traitor or a friend is *my* duty to judge, not the duty of foreigners in the South… I will not forget this so easily."

"Sire, war with Kounan is something we can ill afford." Kikei cautioned, and Kintsusei nodded.

"This I understand." He said flatly. "But even so, I will not let the

South prevent us from achieving peace for Kutou. They can spill his blood, but they cannot kill the ideals that Hyoushin always lived by. Kikei, this is my will. We will retrieve the Shinzahou and the relic from the South — by force, if it is necessary. We will do what it takes to overcome them. I will not play games any longer."

His eyes narrowed.

"Send men to the South, on my order." he added softly. "You may ask Kayu to lead them, since he seems to be the most competent and loyal soldier I have remaining. Send him to find Suzaku no Shinzahou and the relic of Hisei. This is my command."

"On that matter, sire, I have some less unpleasant information." Kikei could barely keep the glee out of his tones as he acknowledged his King's words. "My agents in the south have revealed to me that the girl — Sukunami Hikari — has a direct connection to Suzaku's Shinzahou. It seems the word came from Aoiketsu originally — before his disappearance into the Southern wilderness. What her connection is, I am not entirely sure — but if we were to bring the girl here, surely then we could elicit that information from her and discover what we need to know. I have the impression that she keeps the treasure with her."

"Hyoushin said something to that end." A faint flicker of remembrance flared in the Emperor's dark eyes. "That when they were in Sairou, Suiko sensed Suzaku's Shinzahou in a place it should not have been."

He nodded briskly.

"Very well." He agreed. "Send Kayu and tell him to bring this girl to me… to Kutou. Tell him also to find Shi Maichu and Kaiga Aoiketsu. If they live, I want them returned to Kutou. If you are correct, and this information was truly from Aoiketsu, he may be in grave danger. I will not have more blood spilt if I can prevent it."

"Yes, sire. I understand." Kikei agreed gravely. "I will do as you ask. I will speak to Kayu immediately, and have him leave for the South… I trust he will prove successful."

"I believe in him. And in you." A faint, sad smile touched Kintsusei's lips. "Don't let me down, Kikei. I have noone else to place my faith in now, after all."

"Yes, sire." Kikei bowed his head. "As you wish. If you will excuse me, then, I will go and carry out your instructions at once."

"Do so." Kintsusei agreed. "And Kikei?"

“Yes sir?”

“If you locate the identity of the bandits who slew Hyoushin… I would also like to see them before my court.” Kintsusei’s eyes glittered with something that Kikei had never seen there before. “I would like to pass justice on the men who took his life.”

“Hyoushin may have been a traitor, my Lord… is that necessary?”

“I do not believe that, even if others do.” Kintsusei said firmly. “Whatever he was doing in the South, I believe in his motives. And I will avenge him somehow, Kikei. I must.”

“As Emperor, is such an act wise?”

“This is not an act as Emperor.” Kintsusei shook his head. “It is an act as his friend. I promised him freedom and life and he has never let me down. Yet I have thrown his life away in the pursuit of my own goals, and I cannot accept that. I must have something… some kind of closure…”

He sighed, looking suddenly tired.

“It may be partisan, but I must.” He murmured. “Humour me in this, Kikei. Hyoushin was more than a servant to me. He was my friend… and an Emperor has few chances to form those kinds of alliances.”

“I understand, Heika.” Kikei pursed his lips, then nodded. “I will pass on that command as well. You can have faith in me — I will not let you down.”

With that he withdrew, pausing briefly outside the chamber to reflect on the conversation.

“I saw pure hate in his gaze, then.” He reflected. “Hyoushin’s death… affected him that badly? But maybe I was right all along — that that Meihi’s interference has made a soft, indulgent man of our King. To act with decisiveness and ruthlessness is sometimes the duty of a leader… but it is also concerning. If he begins to discover his own power in this way, he may yet be an obstacle to my ends. To kill the last surviving heir to the royal family is a risk — too much of one, at present — but I must be careful. I underestimated his ties to that ghost of a man… that he would seek so particularly to avenge his death. I should have known that I’d never make him believe Hyoushin was a traitor. But either way, such things are unimportant now.”

He folded his hands in the sleeves of his gown, making his way serenely back towards the seclusion of the shrine.

“Hyoushin is dead.” He murmured. “And there’s no changing that, no matter how much he’d like to. Dead men don’t speak, after all.”

“Kikei-sama!”

As he entered the holy place, he found Kayu waiting for him, an anxious expression on his young face, and at the sight of him, the Priest smiled.

“You needn’t look afraid, boy. You’re not in trouble.” He said gently. “On the contrary… your Emperor has given you instruction, through me, to do something important on his behalf.”

“The Emperor?” Kayu visibly relaxed, his eyes widening in surprise as he digested this. “For me? In particular?”

“Yes.” Kikei agreed. “He wishes you to lead a party of men into the south, in search of Suzaku’s treasures.”

“Me..?” Kayu’s eyes almost fell out of his head. “*Lead* the party?”

“The Emperor’s exact words were — ‘You may ask Kayu to lead them, since he seems to be the most competent and loyal soldier I have remaining’.” Kikei agreed. “He has great faith in you, Kayu-kun — as do I. You are to leave as soon as possible, with men of your own choosing.”

“Men of my…” Kayu faltered, then he seemed to gather his wits, nodding his head.

“I understand.” He said softly. “If the Emperor commands it, I will obey.”

“Good boy.” Kikei’s expression broke into a broad smile and he patted Kayu warmly on the shoulder. “You make me so very proud, my lad — you know that, don’t you? Doing these things for Kutou even in the sight of such adversity.”

“I’m a soldier.” Kayu said firmly. “I can handle it, if it’s in Kintsusei-sama’s name. That’s what I’m trained to do, after all.”

“Indeed.” Kikei’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully for a moment, then he made up his mind. “Listen, my boy… this information is for you and you alone. You will be going into dangerous territory, after all — and I don’t want you to go there unprepared.”

“Unprepared?” Kayu repeated, and Kikei nodded.

“The people in the south are sneaky.” He agreed. “In the past few days I’ve done all I can to find information from that region, and I’ve learnt a few things that are disturbing. Beginning with the progress of

your former Commander."

"Hyoushin-sama." Kayu breathed, and Kikei offered him a sympathetic smile.

"It troubles you, the idea of his treason, doesn't it?" He asked gently, and Kayu nodded.

"Yes." He admitted. "I trusted in him. We all did. And now he's taken Maichu off too. Maichu's an idiot and he wouldn't see all the implications… he can't have a clue what he's involved in."

"That is what I wanted to mention to you." Kikei said quietly. "It seems that Hyoushin — and probably Maichu — headed in the direction of the mountain that conceals Suzaku's relic Hisei. You've been to that location, so I know I can trust you to check the region with thoroughness. But it isn't just the relic I want you to find. I want you to locate the boy, Maichu, and also your other comrade Aoiketsu. As you say, Maichu may well have been coerced — and Aoiketsu is probably ignorant of the things that have gone on in his absence. You are their friend — I believe of all people you can convince them of the best course of action."

"I see." Kayu looked thoughtful. "Yes, maybe you're right. I mean, Maichu's a dolt, but Aoi isn't. And he wouldn't know any of this stuff — he was in Kounan when everything happened in Hokkan. If Hyoushin-sama reached him before we did…"

"The Emperor has already dispatched agents to take care of that problem." Kikei said evenly, and Kayu started, staring at him in surprise.

"Take care of…?"

"At first, Kintsusei-sama wished to be merciful to one he believed was a friend." Kikei said regretfully. "And so he merely exiled him. But it seems that Hyoushin's continued actions became a threat. The girl that you were sent to spy on — Sukunami Hikari — is the guardian of the Shinzahou. Such information appears to have filtered through from Aoiketsu to Hyoushin at some point, and there is no doubt in my mind that it is she Hyoushin sought when he travelled so determinedly south. That being the case, it seems he seeks Suzaku's power to threaten the Emperor. Kintsusei-sama has therefore been forced to dispatch agents to remove him from the scene. Messy and unpleasant as the business is — as Emperor, he has had no choice."

"Agents… to *kill* the Commander?"

"Kayu, he is no longer your Commander."

“I know.” Kayu reddened. “Sorry. It’s just… hard to take in.”

“I know.” Kikei said sympathetically. “But as a soldier, I know you understand sometimes such things are necessary. If Hyoushin was to gather the aid of the South, the power of Suzaku… do you realise what kind of a war we might face, then? He had to be eradicated… for the sake of the East, there was no other option. Hyoushin made his choice to betray his Emperor… and there is only one fate for traitors, after all.”

“Yes, there is.” Kayu frowned, his brows knitting together. “I see. Then I suppose if I see him, that means…”

“I think it unlikely that you will.” Kikei said quietly. “I have already received word of his death. The deed has been carried out, Kayu — a man who is marked for death by the Emperor of Kutou does not live long beyond the giving of the order.”

Kayu sighed heavily, shaking his head as if to clear it.

“And Maichu and Aoi?” He asked softly. “If they won’t come with me… what about them?”

“The Emperor wishes to speak to them.” Kikei said evenly. “So you must find a way to convince them. Without their Commander, I don’t expect they’ll put up much of a fight. You are their comrade, after all. And they are both men loyal to the Emperor.”

“So my task is to find Sukunami Hikari, find Aoi and Maichu, and search for the relic of Hisei?” Kayu asked. Kikei nodded.

“That is your Emperor’s command.” He agreed. “The bandits of Reikaku-zan are fierce, but they are not military folk. You should easily be able to retrieve the things you need. But Kayu, this information about Hyoushin… is confidential. As is our talk regarding Maichu and Aoi. If they can be brought back to Kutou, it will be more difficult if everyone thinks they have somehow betrayed their King. After all, Aoiketsu has merely been operating on the orders he was given before all of this erupted. And Maichu… as you said, Maichu is a fool.”

“Yes, he is.” Kayu said ruefully. “But of all people, I guess I might be able to talk him round. I’ll try, anyhow. But it’s okay, Kikei-sama. I understand what you — and Kintsusei-sama — expect of me. I won’t let you down and I won’t come back to Kutou without finding the things you need. The girl and the relic and any information on the Shinzahou… you have my word.”

“Good.” Kikei smiled. “Then go, Kayu, and make Kutou proud.

After all, there is still a lot to be done before we can await the arrival of Seiryuu no Miko."

Things were becoming worse.

Chichiri stepped out of the front door of the farm house, pausing for a moment to gather his wits as he reflected on the morning's events. Since the arrival of the injured Meihi into his home, he had been engaged in a losing battle to steady the man's fever and bring him back to consciousness, but despite everything he had tried, Hyoushin's temperature had continued to rise steadily, and he had shown no sign of waking up from his stupor.

"Alive he may be, but slipping away." He murmured aloud to himself, glancing down at his hands with a mixture of anger and frustration. "I'm just not cut out to be a healer in this kind of way. It's beyond my capabilities to save this man — I don't know enough. If only Mitsukake were here… but that option is closed to us too. Dammit, I don't want to watch Hyoushin die… even if he is from Kutou, he's still a human being and he's still suffering. And I can't stop that suffering… no matter what I do, nothing seems to work."

"Yo, Chichiri!"

A yell from the path ahead jerked him from his thoughts and he raised his gaze, seeing Tasuki sauntering along the dirt trackway, a resolute Shishi in tow. At the sight of them relief flickered in his heart, although deep down he knew that it was unlikely that Tasuki could do any more for the injured man than he could.

"But even so, I'm glad he's here." He reflected, as he raised a hand to greet them. "And in good time, too."

"So what have you gotten yourself wrapped up in this time, huh?" As he reached the house, Tasuki sent Chichiri a searching look, and the sorcerer knew his wolfish friend had seen the weariness in his ruby gaze. "The cub says you wanted me… that you're takin' in strays from Kutou, now. That's how it is, huh?"

"In a manner of speaking." Chichiri nodded. "You've come quickly, you know… I'm glad of that. I want to talk to you… and I don't think we have a lot of time."

His gaze flitted to Shishi, offering her a tired smile.

"Thank you, Shishi-chan." He murmured. "Hikari and the others are outside, at the back of the farm. They've been waiting for you — and I'd like to speak to your father alone for a while, please."

“Sure thing.” Shishi nodded, and something in her reaction told Chichiri that she was more than a little bit relieved to escape from her father’s immediate attention. “I’ll go find them — and some food, cos I’m starving!”

She grinned at her uncle, then darted off in the direction he had indicated, red hair flying all ways as she vaulted over the hedgerow and disappeared.

“She could use paths and gates instead of treating the place like an assault course.” Chichiri observed absently. “Sometimes she really reminds me of you, Tasuki-kun.”

“Me too.” Tasuki admitted ruefully, rubbing his chin as he contemplated this. “But this isn’t why you called me here, is it? This has somethin’ to do with your waif an’ stray. Let me get it straight — this guy you’ve taken in all of a sudden is Aoiketsu’s Commander from Kutou? The guy who ordered the kid to come here an’ spy on us in the first place?”

“Yes, I imagine so.” Chichiri agreed. “But that’s not really important to me right now. Tasuki, walk up to the stream with me, will you? I don’t want to go far from the house, but I don’t want Aoiketsu or the others to hear our conversation.”

“All right.” Tasuki looked startled, but he shrugged, nodding his head as he fell into step with his friend. “Lead the way. Your ideas are often bizarre but they usually work for you. What’s on your mind this time around?”

“Hyoushin — Aoi’s Commander — was attacked in the forest outside of the village by the man who killed Jin.” Chichiri said slowly, and Tasuki nodded, anger glittering in his bronze eyes.

“Shishi told me that.” He agreed. “What about it?”

“Well, whatever poison he used on Jin, this time it’s not the same.” Chichiri sighed. “But even so, Tasuki… I don’t know how to cure it. He’s still alive… but he’s getting worse, and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“An’ now you’re asking *me*?” Tasuki stared. “Shit, you *are* desperate! What the hell do you think I know about curin’ people? *You* were the one who Mitsukake babbled most of his theories to. Not me… and even if he had, I wouldn’t have remembered them. Facts an’ figures ain’t my thing — I’m an action kind of guy, an’ we both know it.”

“Yes, I know.” Chichiri acknowledged. “But I… I suppose I did have

one… thought about it."

He glanced at his hands.

"Last night Myoume and I had a conversation — about Hikari, Aoi and Hyoushin… about all kinds of things." He said softly. "She said that she thought she was wrong originally about Hyoushin's involvement in the unrest in the East… and I think that it's more than likely he's not our enemy at all. He's just a man loyal to his Emperor… a man who was charged with raising Aoiketsu to believe in Kutou. Aoi isn't a bad youngster, Tasuki — noone who taught him the values he has could be the kind of man to cause all of this devastation that both Toroki and Hikari are predicting."

"So what about it?" Tasuki's eyes narrowed. "This has somethin' to do with our Shinzahou as well, I'm guessin'? An' the fact my daughter's suddenly gone makin' deals with Genbu's lackeys in order to better protect her?"

"Shishi…" Chichi murmured, then he nodded. 'Myoume mentioned something in passing about that.' He responded. "But it's not so much about Suzaku no Shinzahou. Not at the moment. Last night Myoume made a suggestion and the more I think on it, the more I think she's right. Hikari's Suzaku's treasure but she's not just that. She's from the other world and she's not here to save Kounan. She's Seiryuu no Miko."

"*Seiryuu* no…" Tasuki's eyes widened. "Shit, are you for *real*?"

"Completely, you know." Chichiri agreed, sinking down onto the grass as they reached the serene banks of the nearby stream. Tasuki hesitated for a moment, then dropped down next to his friend, his expression one of consternation.

"So Tama's kid is here to protect *Kutou*?" He demanded. "What the hell's with that? She's one of ours, ain't she? She's Suzaku's Shinzahou… Miaka an' Tama's baby… why is she *Seiryuu's* Miko all of a sudden?"

"Because she is." Chichiri said simply. "It's quite brilliant, really… if you stop and think about it. Tasuki, Kounan and Kutou have never really repaired their relationship since the war. Can you think of a better way to do that than to make one of Suzaku's people a vessel for Seiryuu's protective magic, too? The Gods intended for Kutou to reach out to Kounan for help — and that's what's begun to happen. We've been slow, and so have they. But Hyoushin and Maichu's arrival in Kounan seem to be exactly as Seiryuu and Suzaku wanted it. Even if the palace in Kutou haven't realised it yet… they've come to find the

one who can save their land. Our Shinzahou — Sukunami Hikari."

"Shit." Tasuki fell silent for a moment. "Then that kid I had on the mountain… the one Shishi let loose… he's on our side? Or are we on their side? Or are there no sides at all? Or… explain a bit more clearly, will ya? I'm startin' to get confused."

"You're not the only one." Chichiri admitted. "But Myoume believes that it's none of it coincidence. That Hyoushin survived the war and wound up raising Nakago's son like he did — training him and so on — this was all part of the plan. And she's always maintained that Aoi's destiny was to protect Suzaku no Shinzahou. It doesn't make sense… unless Suzaku's Shinzahou is Seiryuu's Miko. And then… then he's taking on his father's mantle and doing what Nakago couldn't do. He's become a replacement for the Seishi that can't be reborn until the legend surrounding Kutou is properly concluded. Equally, Hikari's making allies of Myoume and your Shishi… that's no accident either. We already knew that Shishi was the one who found Hikari, when she first came here. Shishi also brought her back to Kounan. They've a very strong bond too. And Myoume said that Shishi has Genbu's mage — that she received the relic because of something *you* did seven years ago… when you saved someone's life in Souun."

"She said that too." Tasuki sat back against the trunk of a nearby tree, letting out his breath in a rush. "So all of that… it's all been buildin' little by little to this? That we've been innocently livin' our lives in a way that meant Seiryuu no Miko would appear… in Kounan, not Kutou… because in Kounan there were people who'd teach her an' protect her? That Seiryuu knows his country's full of nutjobs because they already messed up the legend once over there… so this time he's got a bit of help from his ol' buddy Suzaku an' dragged us into Kutou's legend?"

"Yes. Basically." Chichiri agreed. "You've got the gist of it."

"That's messed up, you know."

"Perhaps. But like I said, it's also brilliant." Chichiri smiled slightly. "Except that it's taken this long for us to figure it all out. And that's why I want to save Hyoushin's life, Tasuki. If he and Maichu have come to Kounan to find salvation for Kutou… as Maichu more or less intimated to Aoi… then his death could be a major setback for all of us."

"How so?" Tasuki frowned. "Not that I want that bastard Miramu to take another life, but how does it affect us specifically if this Hyoushin dies? He's just a military officer — right?"

“It’s true that he’s just one person, and not a divinely blessed one.” Chichiri agreed. “But from what Myoume and Aoi have both said, I’m pretty sure he’s the only one who might be able to reach the Emperor of Kutou and talk him around to seeing the truth without further bloodshed. At worst, we could wind up with a war breaking out between our countries. If they find out Seiryuu no Miko is here, they might think we’re witholding her. Right now, there’s a lot of uncertainty in Kutou. Aoi’s told me about a man of Hin heritage who has a lot of power there — the man who gives that assassin his orders, and probably who ordered Hyoushin’s death too. That’s our true enemy. But if Hyoushin really does have the Emperor’s trust… he might be the one who can broach relations between us and them. And for Seiryuu no Miko to go safely to Kutou and raise the God… we need all the help we can get.”

“All right. I guess I’m with you.” Tasuki frowned, his brows knitting together. “A Hin, huh? Like Nakago?”

“So it seems.”

“They’re a pretty messed up lot, ain’t they?”

“I’m not sure it’s about the tribe, you know.” Chichiri looked thoughtful. “Aoiketsu’s one too, by his father’s blood… but I think he’s turned out quite well.”

He sighed.

“But right now our immediate problem is that Hyoushin’s been poisoned by an experienced assassin who probably took all precautions in case he was interrupted mid-assault.” He added. “And I don’t know what I’m dealing with. Myoume’s with him now — her people are apothecaries, so she knows bits and pieces and I wanted to come wait for you. But even so, it probably doesn’t matter. I don’t know how to save him… little by little he’s slipping away.”

“Then there’s not a lot to be done, is there?” Tasuki grimaced. “All very well you sayin’ he’s important an’ on our side an’ all, but we’re not capable of Mitsukake’s healin’ magic.”

“I wondered what might happen if we combined our strength.” Chichiri eyed him hopefully, and Tasuki snorted, shaking his head.

“Don’t be an idiot.” He said bluntly. “This ain’t a byouma, an’ this Meihi guy ain’t a Seishi. It’s not the same thing, Chichiri — it’s poison, right? Pure an’ simple. No amount of Suzaku chi can drive that out of someone… we both know that.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Mitsukake might’ve been able to do it.” He admitted. “But as I said, neither of us is him. You’ve got a lot of spells up your sleeve, Chichiri, but curin’ poison ain’t one of them. An’ even if we could somehow drive the toxin out, he’d never survive an onslaught of your chi an’ mine. We’re stronger than ordinary people. Jus’ because you an’ Hotohori-sama drove a byouma out o’ me years ago… this isn’t the same. It’d kill him… or don’t you know your own strength? You damn near killed me… if I hadn’t been Tasuki, I’d probably have been done for.”

“I know.” Chichiri admitted unwillingly, burying his head in his hands as he nodded. “It was a desperate question, but you’re right. I just… I’m out of options. He keeps getting weaker, and I feel helpless.”

“You don’t haveta tell me about that feelin’.” Tasuki said quietly, and Chichiri knew he was thinking about his adoptive son. “But sometimes shit happens. An’ those of us who’re left have to pick up the bits an’ push it on. Hyoushin came South lookin’ for Seiryuu no Miko — but he didn’t come here alone, right? The kid came with him. All the things we need to know, that kid probably knows. An’ sure, maybe we can’t talk to the Emperor of Kutou quite so easily, but that was never goin’ to be so simple in the first place.”

He got to his feet, reaching out a hand to haul his friend up.

“If the Meihi dies, we’ll avenge him.” He added. “Like Jin — I don’t mind. For now, jus’ make it easier on the poor guy… so he ain’t gonna suffer through it. There were people even Mitsukake couldn’t save, after all. Don’t take it so hard if there’s one you can’t, either.”

Chichiri eyed his friend for a moment. Then he smiled sadly, a sheepish look glittering in his ruby eye as he allowed his companion to pull him to his feet.

“True as that might be, it’s hollow.” He admitted. “But I’ll carry on doing what I can. Meantime, Maichu’s told Aoiketsu most things, and I think he’ll open up more to the girls, too, now he realises Aoi trusts them. I’m worried for his safety too, to tell the truth. Myoume predicted something bad to happen to him in Kounan, so I’m worried the assassin might come back.”

“If he does, he’ll find a tessen waitin’ for him.” Tasuki said grimly, brushing his fingers against the edge of the harisen as he did so. “I ain’t kidding… he’d better not even think about comin’ near this place again.”

“I feel the same way.” Chichiri assured him. “And Myoume’s senses

are quite sharp… she picked him up this time and because she did, we at least were able to bring Hyoushin back here alive. If he wakes up, perhaps he can tell us something himself… I guess we should be thankful for small mercies in times like this."

"Chichiri… about Shishi…" Tasuki hesitated, then he sighed. "About this Genbu dame she's become all buddy-buddy with… do you think it's okay?"

"Myoume said that Shishi had woken the mage because of blood from the Seishi Urumiya, and that the spirit had taken a liking to Shishi right away." Chichiri said thoughtfully. "That they'd established a connection, but that Doryoku — Genbu's mage — didn't seem hostile or dangerous. I think you have to let the cub handle this one her way, Tasuki-kun. The truth is, she's been looking for her strength and losing Jin took its toll on her. She couldn't prevent that. But now… now she's having to grow up and accept that there's a reason he died and she didn't. This seems to be it. Your daughter's as strong as you are, you know… she'll be fine."

"I guess I know that." Tasuki pursed his lips. "All right. I told her already I'd trust her an' go with it, although I ain't sure if I like it. Still… if that's how it is, I guess… there's nothing to be done about it, huh?"

"If it can help her protect Hikari, then it's not a bad thing." Chichiri reflected. "And that's her job, whether you like it or not. That's clear now… Shishi has to go with Hikari places because of that fact. And so she'll go to Kutou, too — better she has some way of defending herself, don't you think?"

"Yes, I suppose so." Tasuki agreed at length.

"When I'm less preoccupied, Tasuki-kun, I promise to sit Shishi down and talk to her about this." Chichiri said softly. "Help her, if I can, to manage what she's acquired. But I'm not worried about her. She's doing what we all do when it comes to protecting a Miko, that;s all. Of all people we understand that better than most."

"That's why it worries me." Tasuki admitted. "Because I know what it means. She ain't a Seishi, even if she has been singled out for this. An' bein' a Miko's protector can mean bein' a sacrifice. Jin… I already buried Jin. I can't bury Shishi too."

"Have some faith in her, huh?" Chichiri chided gently. "I do. I think she's stronger now than she's ever been, and more grown up, too. Your cub's almost a full grown lion, now. And you have to let her do what she needs to do. This is her task, after all. Not ours."

“I know.” Tasuki sighed. “All right. I got it. I ain’t gonna try an’ intervene. I just… this is turnin’ out to be a pretty dangerous game we’re all involved in… an’ it’s probably gonna get more so, too. I jus’ hope that this time when the smoke clears an’ the dust settles… the price of freedom an’ peace won’t have been too high.”

Chapter 13

Chapter Twelve

The afternoon was drawing on.

Myoume rested her hands against the window of the farmhouse's back chamber, gazing sightlessly out at the grounds beyond as she struggled to put events together in her mind. Beneath the shade of one of the big willow trees, Hikari and her companions had settled to talk and eat, but even the mingled sound of their voices carrying across the grounds did not penetrate her thoughts.

She sighed heavily, turning back towards the bed as her gaze rested on the pale form that lay there, his beautiful amethyst eyes still closed despite all of Chichiri's best attempts to rouse him. Sweat beaded his brow, and gently Myoume dipped the white strip of cloth into the bowl of water Meikyo had brought to the chamber earlier, wringing out the excess liquid as she placed it gently against the Meihi's chalk-white skin.

He did not stir, lost somewhere deep in a fever induced stupor, and something about his lack of reaction further deepened Myoume's lingering gloom.

"I've been so stupid." She murmured. "I didn't put the pieces together in the right way. I'm sorry, Byakko. If I'd paid closer attention to Aoi's words earlier… I should know better than to jump to conclusions about people. My judgement is no better than anyone else's if I stray away from Toroki's sight to make my assessments. And that it should have been Miramu… to do something like this so deep into Kounan…"

She faltered, closing her eyes as she remembered the look on her brother's face when they had encountered one another in the clearing.

"He looked upset. Not annoyed, but distressed by seeing me. Just as he did when we met in the shrine in Sairou." She realised. "Does he hate the sight of me so much as that? Or does he just not like witnesses to his dirty work? That first time he killed Jin and I could not prevent it. This time..I didn't see it this time until after the deed was done. Is that because I was so adamant on following my own assumptions? Did I just not listen — *could* I have prevented this?"

A faint murmur from the bed startled her out of her thoughts and

she opened her eyes, glancing at the patient as she did so. For a moment the man's eyelids fluttered, then they once more lay still, and as Myoume gently removed the now warm towel from the Meihi's brow, she realised with a jolt that his breathing had quickened considerably within the last half an hour. Setting the cloth aside, she brushed her left hand against his cheek, registering that his fever had risen once more.

"Perhaps it would have been kinder to let Miramu have his way." She reflected sadly. "To end it quickly… not like this. I'm sorry, Hyoushin. I don't know how to cure you of this poison. What it is — even that I don't know. I wish I did."

As if in answer to her words, Hyoushin let out another incoherent murmur, shifting slightly beneath the woven blankets and Myoume's breath caught in her throat as she waited for the silent form to stir. And yet his eyes remained closed, and her heart sank as she realised that it had simply been the effects of his fever.

"You can't hear me." She murmured. "I don't know where you are, but it's not here, is it? Whatever this toxin is, it's powerful stuff and it's got a good hold on you now."

She drew her hand back, eying him for a moment as he shifted a second time, a faint whimper of what sounded like fear passing his lips. This time his eyelids opened slightly, revealing the unusual amethyst eyes beneath, but as soon as she saw them Myoume knew that Hyoushin was still wrapped in the hallucinations of fever. His gaze glittered with the mad brilliance of delerium and as he flung out his right hand towards her she let out an exclamation, jerking back as she felt the scarred, pale fingers close around the sleeve of her gown. More words spilled from his lips, and though they were incoherent and unclear, the tone of them was not. Myoume's heart wrenched as she registered the sudden flicker of fear in the tribesman's expression, swallowing hard as she saw the shimmering of tears in the Meihi's violet gaze.

"You're scared of something." She said softly, getting down on her knees beside the bed as she resisted the urge to pull away from his clammy, desperate grasp. Instead she slipped her own gloved fingers into his, squeezing his hand reassuringly as she reached her other hand up to brush the sweat-damp wisps of hair from out of his face. "Hyoushin, it's all right. It's just the fever… please, calm down. You can't give in to this… whatever it's making you see isn't real. It's just a delusion… you have to fight against it."

Hyoushin twitched and shifted again, murmuring something under

his breath, and the plaintive, desperate note tugged against Myoume's heart as she realised how childlike the man's words sounded.

"A frightened child… calling for help." She whispered. "That sits so much at odds with you, Hyoushin… your calm, impassive, cold exterior… who are you, then, that when your guard is down you can submit to such terror? And how can I snap you out of it? Chichiri's not here — he's gone to speak to Tasuki and I said I'd take care of you till he returns. But at this rate… at this rate you're going to frighten yourself to death. You have to fight against it… somehow. You have to, Hyoushin. This is not the real you… this isn't how you are. You're the man who's raised Aoiketsu to be the man he is now. For his sake at least, you have to fight this."

There was no response, and Myoume knew that the tribesman had not heard a word of what she had said. And yet his grip on her did not lessen, as if somehow she had become his anchor in a world of fear and pain. She sighed, resting her free hand against his chest as she felt the racing, pounding beat of the man's heart against his ribs. The quickening of his breathing and the sweat that ran down his face were indications not just of fever, she realised, but of fright, and that if she did not do something, it would be terror and not poison that spoke for his life.

"This poison causes you to hallucinate and you can't find your way out." She mused. "Dammit, then I… what else can I do? I can't just sit back here..I have to…"

She faltered, glancing around her to make sure noone else was in the room. Then, very carefully, she unclasped Hyoushin's fingers from around her right hand, setting his fist down against the bedcovers as she slowly slipped off her black-weave glove. For a moment she gazed at her hand, eying the glittering white mark of Toroki that burned against the tip of index finger. Then she took a deep breath into her lungs, closing her eyes as she once more slid her fingers into the patient's clammy grasp.

At once she felt like she was drowning, as pictures, emotions and sounds all washed over her at once, and she gasped, fighting the urge to draw her hand back as she struggled to get a grip on her wits. For a moment it seemed like she had been scattered far and wide across this expanse of confusion that was the inside of Hyoushin's mind, and as a second wave of emotion washed over her, she forced herself to calm down, fighting to detach herself from the panic and terror of the man who lay before her.

His guard was completely down, she realised, the fever having

rendered him completely undefended against her intrusion, and she took a deep breath, calming herself further as she gently pieced the fragments of her thoughts back into one cohesive form. Carefully she raised her own shields, blocking out the flurry of fear and panic that battered against her senses, and as she did so, she found the melee of images clearing for the first time as she became more and more aware of Hyoushin's fever driven thoughts.

As she did so, pain stabbed through her heart and she flinched back, taking in the scene around her with a growing sense of horror and dismay.

A small boy sat huddled in a corner of a crowded carriage, his knees hugged tightly to his chest as tears streamed down his face. All around him, other children of varying ages were similarly crammed in, many crying and screaming for their parents, but although he did not stop crying, the young boy who had first caught her attention did not make a sound. His thick silver hair was tousled and loose around his face, and in the depths of his amethyst eyes she saw a mixture of hopelessness and dazed devastation. With a jolt, she registered the stain of blood on his clothing, and her heart caught in her throat.

"Hyou… shin?" She murmured, but the boy did not look up, and Myoume realised that she had not yet gone deeply enough into the Meihi's thoughts to be able to penetrate them completely.

The carriage jerked to a halt, sending many of the children falling on top of one another with screams and yells of terror. Only the pale boy in the furthest corner did not react as the back of the wagon was flung open, a brawny man framed by bright sunlight glaring in at them as he eyed each in turn. With a word to his companion, he began hauling the youngsters out one at a time, eying them up as if they were animals sent to market before tossing them aside on the hard ground and moving on to the next one.

When he reached the young Meihi boy, he smirked, touching the boy's face as he said something too soft for Myoume to hear. The boy did not react, and like the others, he was pushed aside, scraping his knees and elbows as he fell.

"A slave market." Somewhere deep within her consciousness, Myoume realised what she was seeing, and horror flared in her heart once more. "Delusions… these aren't delusions! These are *memories*… I've broken into his past, and I'm trespassing all over it! But I can't help it — I've come this far now and I have to go further. Hyoushin, I'm sorry — but if it helps you even a little bit… I have to push deeper."

She closed her eyes, pressing her index finger more firmly against Hyoushin's skin as she forced her thoughts to penetrate even further into the Meihi's mind. As she did so, fragments of other memories flickered past her — the blood-soaked corpse of a man falling before his family, the burning of a village… the piteous begging of a young girl as her brother ran back towards the flames. Despite the fact the children spoke in the unfamiliar Meihi tongue, Myoume found she was able to understand everything that was said, and the plaintive cries of the small girl brought tears to her eyes as they grew fainter and fainter.

"Hyoushin." She murmured. "*This* is what you're afraid of. The things in your past that you've buried deep within your heart. The fever's brought them all out, hasn't it? My brother… what has he done to you, forcing you to suffer this way?"

Even as this thought crossed through her mind, a plaque loomed large before her, carved in stone with the unfamiliar writing of the snow tribe engraved carefully against the black background. Although she had never seen Meihi writing before, Myoume found that, looking at it through the veil of Hyoushin's consciousness she could read the words as clearly as if they had been written in Kanji, and as she absorbed the words, her heart clenched.

"Lilaihi." She whispered. "Your true self… this is you, isn't it? Hyoushin is an illusion — a mirage. He's just the façade of who you've become. But this… this is your real identity. And this… these characters… I understand now. This is a memorial, isn't it? For the people you loved and lost. And yet… all these thoughts are swirling around your mind, interspersed with memories of the events. How can I even begin to suppress them, when they're beginning to gnaw away at *my* heart, too? I have to focus — to rationalise my thoughts and keep myself together. You need me to — I can't be distracted, not even by the horror of your childhood. I've invaded your mind and your privacy — I must at least take some good out of doing so."

She pulled together the drifting wisps of her consciousness, focusing them into one strand of white light as she pored deeper into the core of Hyoushin's consciousness, hunting for a memory that caused him less pain. All around her she was aware of the burning heat of the man's fever and the faint calls for help that the stricken man let out from time to time. Now she understood why they had seemed like a child's call — they were the pleas of an orphaned slave for someone to rescue him from his fate.

"And noone did." She reflected sadly. "Not until the Kaiga family

were all killed. Aoiketsu said that Kintsusei-sama saved you from that life… how could I doubt your loyalty to him, then? If he was the one who heard your call and rescued you from this hell? I understand a lot more now. A… a lot more."

At this juncture, her thread of white light locked onto something hidden deep within Hyoushin's thoughts, and she coiled her magic around it, pulling it firmly forward as she carefully moulded it into a solid, coherent image. A woman stood in the centre of the picture, a young girl of two or three cradled in her arms, and at her feet, two small boys played — one aged about eight, and the other no more than five. The woman's features were kind and gentle, her violet eyes alive with spirit and affection, and as Myoume reached out towards the image, she felt the glow of warmth that emitted from it.

"This is a happy time." She decided, relief flooding her heart as she realised she'd found her anchor. "A time before the horrible things happened to him and his family. If I can bring him to this place… then he'll surely calm down. If I can only suppress the nightmares and replace them with this — with his mother, because it's her he's calling for in his delirium. It's her that he seeks… perhaps if I can make him see her, it will help him recover… at least a little bit. He has no defence against this poison except his own will and strength, so I have to help him somehow."

Gently she coated the memory in her spiritual magic, bringing her own thoughts together as she twisted the blaze of white light into the form of a person. As she did so, she felt fatigue begin to creep over her body, and she muttered a curse, forcing herself forward as she tried to ignore how much energy she had already expended. Never before had she tried so hard or for so long to invade another's thoughts and consciousness, and even though the Meihi's defences were completely down, it was becoming increasingly more difficult separating her thoughts and feelings from Hyoushin's own.

"I'm personally involved." She realised with a jolt, as she succeeded in gathering her wits, redoubling her efforts as she sent flares of magic back in the direction of Hyoushin's dark memories. "This man… I have a connection to him. The one I cross paths with many times… Hyoushin of the East. The name has deceived me… that's all. Hyoushin is not your true name. That is not your true self. You are Lilaihi. The *Meihi* characters for Man and Peace, scribed on that plaque… that is who you are. The one who I will meet — the one in whom I should put my trust and faith… have I allowed you to be killed because of my blindness? If it takes all of my strength, somehow, I'm going to use my magic to help you. Even if I can't cure

you, I'm not going to let you carry on suffering like this. If you must die, Hyoushin, I'll make sure you have some peace first. It's my way of saying I'm sorry… even if, in the end, it's not enough."

At that moment she saw the small child once more, dressed only from the waist down as the rain beat down around him, soaking his skin and ragged clothing both in a relentless onslaught of sharp water shards. And yet, the boy's big, amethyst eyes were fixed on a shadow that loomed over him, a cruel leather-thonged whip in the man's hands as he advanced on the boy menacingly. As the brawny slave-keeper raised the whip, Myoume realised that the child's back was already red raw, and that it was not only rainwater but also blood that ran off his pale skin onto the ground below.

Anger flared through the prophet's heart and she dove forward, throwing caution to the wind as she threw all of her psychic energy into Hyoushin's memories, placing herself forcibly between the boy and the man with the whip. As she did so, the cold, wet tip of the implement came down against her skin, and although it was only a delusion and she was not really there, Myoume let out an involuntary gasp of pain at the sudden sensation. As she did so, however, she realised that she had managed to break through into the deepest recess of Hyoushin's mind, and the knowledge gave her her second wind. She turned to the boy, who stared at her in uncomprehending silence, and slowly she held out a hand to him, slipping her spectral fingers around his small, rain-soaked ones.

"It's all right." She whispered, knowing that somehow he would understand her, and hoping that it would be enough. "This isn't where you should be. This is the past. This is over, now. You don't need to feel these things here, you know. This memory is over… this man can't keep hurting you. I won't let him do that any more."

The boy blinked at her, making no attempt to speak, and Myoume knew that Hyoushin was too weak to fight against her will. A flicker of guilt surged through her as she grasped the youngster firmly by both hands, engulfing him in her magic as she gently reordered the Meihi's thoughts, bringing forward the memory of the happy family scene as one by one she suppressed the other illusions back into the depths of Hyoushin's consciousness. Then, once sure she had isolated each one, she placed her hand gently against the child's brow.

"Sleep now." She whispered. "You're tired, and you need to rest. It will all be well, when you wake."

The boy stared at her for a moment, and Myoume thought she saw a faint flicker of recognition in his amethyst gaze. Then it was gone,

and slowly he closed his eyes, allowing her to cast her spell over him as he sank deeper into her trance. As he did so, Myoume felt the flood of panic and fear that had surrounded her begin to wane, and she let out her breath in a rush, relief washing over her as she realised she had succeeded.

"I've done all I can." She murmured. "And I need to get out of here before I lose myself completely. This place… is somewhere I don't want to come again. To trespass here… was a bad thing to do. But I couldn't let him suffer like that."

She focused her thoughts, forcing them back into her own mind and body as slowly she once more became aware of her physical form and carefully she drew her index finger away from Hyoushin's skin, taking a shuddering breath of air into her lungs as she struggled to regain her wits. Slowly she opened her eyes, resting her hands against the bed to steady herself as her seiran eyes darted towards the patient. He was breathing more evenly, she realised, and she let out her breath in a rush, nodding slowly.

"He's sleeping peacefully." She realised, as a wave of dizziness washed over her. "Oh, but that was… was tough. All of those things… you've really been through so much, and I shouldn't have seen any of it. I had no right…"

She closed her eyes again as tears overwhelmed her, streaming down her cheeks now that the pressure was off and her emotions flooded through her body.

"You're my man of peace." She whispered. "I didn't realise it — Hyoushin is a Chinese name — but your Meihi name… that's what it means. You're him — the one I'm supposed to trust in. And instead I've let this happen… I'm sorry, Hyoushin. I'm so, so sorry. For Miramu, for my own stupidity… have I jeopardised everything because of my foolishness? Have I cost you your life because I was blind?"

She cast another glance at the sleeping figure, suddenly finding the room stifling and claustrophobic as she remembered the images that had assailed her during her time within Hyoushin's psyche. She took a shuddering breath, dashing away her tears but yet more fell in their place and eventually she gave up trying to check them, curling up against the wall as she buried her head in her arms. Her own emotions had been ripped raw by the effort of what she had done, she knew that — but it was the feeling of helplessness that hung most heavily over her head as she submitted to her doubt and grief. Whether Hyoushin's panic had been abated or not, she knew that whatever

poison her brother had used was still rife in the Meihi's body, and no matter what she did, she could do nothing to remove it.

"As Miramu said." She spoke the words aloud, taking no comfort from hearing the emptiness of her own voice. "I can't change things that have already been done. Even if I can see them, damn it all."

"*Myoume*?"

The sound of a voice jerked her head from her arms as she started from her reverie, staring uncomprehendingly at the intruder as she struggled to compose herself.

"Myoume, what the hell's happened?" Hikari was down at her side in an instant, anxious hazel eyes going towards the sleeping Meihi as she did so. "He isn't… he hasn't… has he?"

"No… he's asleep." Myoume swallowed hard, shaking her head. "I just… Hikari, I feel so useless. So completely helpless. I can't take Miramu's actions back."

Hikari eyed her for a moment. Then, gently, she pulled her friend to her feet.

"You've been here all morning, and you need a break." She said softly. "If he's sleeping, there's nothing you can do right now, after all… right? You've had nothing to eat today and you should."

"I'm not hungry." Myoume shook her head. "I'm worried… about him."

"We all are." Hikari said pragmatically. "Aoi and Maichu especially. But this isn't like you — I've never seen you like this before."

Myoume swallowed hard, not trusting herself to answer, and as she glanced down, Hikari let out an exclamation, reaching over to pick up the forgotten black glove from the Meihi's bedcovers.

"You used your powers on him somehow, didn't you?" She asked softly. "Myoume… I don't understand, what did you…?"

"I invaded his privacy, but I had to do something." Myoume said unsteadily. "He was… I hypnotised him to sleep, that's all. I don't like… going into someone's head without their permission is a bad thing. Unforgivable. But I… I couldn't let him suffer… like he was."

She closed her eyes as fresh storms threatened, and Hikari sighed, hugging her companion tightly.

"You've worn yourself out, in short." She remarked. "In which case, you're definitely coming with me outside. Aoi and Maichu have gone

to help Eiju cut firewood, because Aidou-san got all scary about cooking a meal with an empty woodshed, so it'll just be Shishi and me. You can talk to us, right? If Aoi isn't around, you won't worry him any further about Hyoushin right now."

"I can't just leave him…" Myoume protested weakly, but Hikari shook her head.

"I told you, you're coming." She said firmly. "Here… put this back on, before you get a dose of my thoughts on top of whatever you've already done to yourself… right now I don't think you could take it."

Myoume stared at Hikari in surprise, taking the glove wordlessly as she slipped it over her fingers. At her expression, Hikari smiled sheepishly, shrugging her shoulders.

"You always play oneechan to Shishi and me." She remarked. "But right now you're all over the place. And it's not like I don't know how to be a bossy big sister. I have a brother back in my world, remember. And I'm stubborn, too — so come with me, okay? You'll feel better — the air's stifling in here and it's a hot day."

Without waiting for her friend to respond, the young schoolgirl had taken Myoume firmly around the wrists, leading her forcibly out of the small back room and out onto the Ri farm grounds. Shishi was lounging against the trunk of the favoured willow tree, eating fruit, and at the sight of Myoume in tears her eyes widened.

"What did you do to her?" She demanded. "Shit, Myoume, quit leaking like that! I ain't got a clue what to do with crying people, and that's a fact!"

"Shishi, shut up." Hikari said frankly. "Myoume, sit down, okay? Just take a break. This isn't like you, and you need to calm down."

Myoume took a deep breath, running her fingers through her thick wavy hair as she did so.

"I'm sorry." She murmured. "I just… lost it for a moment or two. I couldn't help it… I'm exhausted and it's really catching up to me."

"You went delving into Hyoushin's head, didn't you?" Hikari dropped down next to her. "That's what you did, when you put him to sleep."

"No wonder you're freaked out, then." Shishi shivered. "Going into people's thoughts is not a nice habit, Myoume… and that guy's not exactly… normal."

"He's a man like any other man." Myoume snapped, and as Shishi

stared at her, she sighed, shaking her head.

“Byakko knows I’m all over the place.” She murmured. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap. I just… feel helpless. Useless. Like there’s nothing I can do. Like I’ve made so many bad judgements lately — perhaps always. Perhaps this is all my fault after all.”

“It’s not your fault.” Hikari shook her head. “You’re just tired and reading too much into things.”

“It’s *Miramu’s* fault.” Shishi added.

“That doesn’t make it easier.” Myoume said softly. “Someone I love has done another terrible thing and I can’t undo it.”

“Someone you love?” Shishi snorted. “I’d give up on that if I were you. Miramu’s not exactly the reciprocal affection type of guy… you’re wasting your time and worry on someone who’s long since crossed the line into pure evil.”

“No, it’s not that at all.”

Myoume shook her head, impatience in her eyes. “It’s not that Miramu’s evil. He’s never been evil. You don’t understand — that’s what makes this whole situation so bad.”

“What do you mean?” Hikari looked startled. “I know he’s your brother, but Myoume…”

“He killed Jin.” Shishi said darkly. “He abducted Meikyo. And now he’s felled Hyoushin — which is apparently botherin’ you enough to have you in floods of tears. How much more proof do you need that the guy’s a demon in human clothing?”

“No.” Myoume bit her lip. “It’s not like that. It never was.”

She sighed, glancing at her hands, and Hikari could see the tears glittering once more on her lashes.

“Miramu was a kind person. A sensitive person.” She said softly. “He was gentle, and warm, and the kind of big brother I could rely on. I adored him so much — and he was mother’s pride and joy. We had a bond — maybe because we were Seishi, maybe because of my power — but we could even speak to one another telepathically — that was how strong our connection was. Back then, Miramu had so much potential — wit and intelligence and affection for those around him. It was… not the same at all, then.”

“Somehow I can’t see that.” Shishi frowned. “That doesn’t sound like the assassin we all know and hate.”

“I know.” Myoume sighed. “You have to understand though that it’s because of those things — *because* Miramu was that kind of person — that he’s become the one he is now. It might seem strange to you — but it’s that way nonetheless. If he had been evil… if he had just been cold to the world… I’m sure it wouldn’t have gone as far as this.”

“You’re not making a lot of sense.” Hikari said quietly, settling herself more comfortably as she cast her friend a confused gaze. “Why would that happen? I don’t follow at all.”

Myoume hesitated. Then,

“My brother and my father never really got along.” She said quietly, twisting her fingers together absently as she did so. “It wasn’t strange that it should be the case — Papa was my father, but he wasn’t Miramu’s. The story we were always told was that Mama had been widowed… and that she’d remarried after Miramu was born. It wasn’t a problem, it was just how it was. And Papa always favoured me over Miramu because I was his child, but Miramu was never jealous. He always wanted to protect me… he never let Father’s attitude bother him at all.”

She bit her lip.

“It bothered me more than it did him.” She admitted. “I didn’t like it, or really understand it. Lots of fathers take in children who aren’t their own — Tasuki took in Jin, after all. But Father… he never said what it was, but there was something more to his reason for disliking my brother. Even though Miramu and I were Seishi and that was a cause for honour in our family… he still didn’t accept him. But like I said, Miramu never bothered about it at all. He and I were close, and he and mother, too. He loved us and wanted to protect us. He’d say that… that that was why Byakko had chosen him. So he could protect the people who he was close to.”

“So what happened?” Shishi demanded.

“My parents had an argument.” Myoume murmured. “It wasn’t an argument we were meant to overhear — Mother had sent us on an errand, and they thought the house was empty else I know Father would not have said the things he did. They were discussing the future of the farmstead — whether or not it would pass to my hands or to Miramu’s, for he was at the right age to be properly apprenticed as an apothecary. Father wouldn’t have it. He wouldn’t have Miramu any part an heir to the estate… and he told my mother so in no uncertain terms. We came back and heard his reasons…”

She closed her eyes, the tears trickling down her cheeks once more.

“I had never seen my brother like that before.” She whispered. “When he heard… the reason… my father would not love him.”

“If you don’t want to tell us, you don’t have to.” Hikari said hurriedly. “It’s all right, you know… you’ve already upset yourself enough and you don’t have to confide something like this if its difficult to talk about. I didn’t bring you out here to make you cry all over again.”

“But I want you to understand.” Myoume shook her head, raising helpless dark blue eyes to her companion’s worried hazel ones. “Why it is I still love him… even after everything he’s done.”

She sighed.

“Miramu loved my mother so much.” She murmured. “It was natural that he should, since he had no affection from Father. His world revolved around her — around us. When he heard my father talking so bluntly about his conception… no, in fact, the *assault* that led to his conception… it was like someone had struck through him with a knife. In that one instant he learnt not only that he had been born illegitimate, but that he had been conceived by rape… by a man in the local town of Eiroku, who had taken my mother unawares and forced his attentions on her. My brother who loved my mother so much… had to hear how she had suffered in order to bring him into the world.”

She buried her head in her hands.

“They tried to smooth it over, when they realised he had heard… but it was too late.” She said slowly. “Miramu… in that instant, his world shattered. I never saw him lose his temper like that — but it wasn’t just anger. It was fear. Panic. Guilt. So many emotions were flowing forth from him that I couldn’t disentangle one from the other and I doubt that he could, either. Mother tried to reason with him, but he pushed her away and screamed at her to leave him alone. And then… then he vanished. For the first time he used his Seishi power in front of my parents… and disappeared. Everything was in such turmoil and I was so confused… my mother was crying, my father distressed… and I didn’t know what to do. So I… I ran and hid in my room. But even there I could feel my brother’s pain echoing against my senses. It wasn’t just distress, it was betrayal, too. And try as I might, I could not reach him. It was then that I started having violent visions — I had never been alone with them before, and I don’t know how much time passed while I was there, trapped in that world. It must have been some time, but I really don’t know for sure.”

She took a deep breath of air into her lungs, calming herself.

“The next thing I knew, there were people from Eiroku banging on the farmhouse door and claiming that there’d been a grisly murder.” She said unsteadily. “That officials from the city were searching for Geiyo Miramu — the boy Amefuri — in order to charge him with the crime. Mother protested but in vain — he’d left his mark at the scene, in the form of his stellar sign. Try as they might, noone could find him. But I… I could. So when things were quieter, I slipped out of the house and went in search of him. I wanted him to come home… instead I made it worse. When he heard what I’d seen — that we’d one day fight one another — he took off and left. He shut me out of his thoughts once and for all, and though I can track his chi, I can no longer feel what he’s thinking. He was gone, then. My brother.”

“That’s so sad.” Hikari murmured.

“Even if that is true, though, it doesn’t excuse him going on a murder for hire spree.” Shishi said bluntly, and Myoume shook her head.

“No.” She admitted. “Nothing excuses that. I think probably even Miramu knows that, deep down inside. But you have to understand what a huge event it was. *Because* he loved us so much — because he felt so deeply about things — it scarred him. And then, when his temper had cooled and he realised what he’d done — that he’d avenged mother’s attack but slain his blood-father, I guess his doubts must have really set in. He asked me, the last time I saw him then, why it was he didn’t feel guilty, if he wasn’t an evil person. Why he’d killed a man and yet he was glad, not sorry that he’d done it. I was ten years old and I didn’t have an answer for him — not one that he could absorb, anyway. I suppose he must have begun then, to consider himself a demon. Unredeemable. Perhaps he lost his mind… but I don’t think that’s it. Chichiri said he was using Ma Huang when he took Meikyo, and a man who uses a herb like that to manage his mood must still have feelings and understand right from wrong. He’s just become full of bitterness, that’s all. Twisted by it, I suppose. He blames Byakko for Mother’s assault, because it resulted in his birth. So he denies his identity as Amefuri and he acts the way he does — as someone who causes doubt, chaos and suffering. I don’t know why he does it… but I suspect… he does it simply to prove to himself that he’s still alive.”

She grimaced, wiping her tears away.

“Or maybe he does it to continue to punish himself.” She murmured. “Maybe he’s trying to find the person whose death he’ll

feel something for… I wonder about that. Whether or not, in the end, he's just trying to find himself again… or prove that he's a human being, after all."

"I won't forgive him for Jin's murder." Shishi said quietly. "No matter what he's been through, or what's happened to him — I can't do that, Myoume. Even if Miramu is messed up like you say… it changes nothing. He still made my family suffer, and that's not something that I can forgive. Not now and not ever."

She reached out a hand to touch Myoume's arm.

"Besides, you might be right, but you might be wrong." She added. "Even if he was once good, it doesn't mean he still is in any part. And you shouldn't let him make you suffer like this over him. That makes me angry too. I doubt he cares as much about it as you do. Noone who's killed as many times as he must have can still have any kind of conscience. Maybe he was right, when he told you he was evil. You need to let it go… it ain't good for you."

"I can't." Myoume shook her head. "This is how it is, Shishi. He's my brother, I love him. And I suppose maybe part of me hopes that one day he'll be my brother again. Even if… even if we're both dead before it happens. I… I can wait forever, if that's what it takes. I can wait any number of lifetimes, if I have to. But… I can't give up on him completely. Even though I'm Byakko's and even though I must fight him like this… he's still my brother. I can't let that tie go."

She swallowed hard, composing herself, then,

"And now I'm in a place I never thought I'd be." She added unevenly. "Caught between my brother and…"

She faltered, then,

"Shishi… Hikari… do you remember a conversation we had… in Choukou?"

"In Choukou?" Hikari frowned at the sudden shift in conversation. "At Mitsukake's grave? Or when Aoi blew his cover and revealed he was really pretty good at fighting?"

"Neither." Myoume shook her head. "About a vision… something I'd seen… when I was young and stupid."

"Seen?" Shishi's brow creased. "Like what?"

Hikari's eyes widened.

"The man of peace!" She exclaimed. "That's it, isn't it? Your

mystery guy — your soul-mate! That's what you're talking about, isn't it?"

"He's *not* my soulmate." Myoume said bitterly. "He's not ever been anything more than a shadow in the back of my thoughts… *you* were the one who put that spin on it, not me."

"But that is what you're referring to?" Shishi looked confused. "What has that to do with Miramu and his bloodlust? I don't get it."

Myoume swallowed again, tracing a pattern absently on the ground as she worked out how to phrase her next words.

"I've not been driven to confide in people for a long time." She whispered. "But you two have become like family to me. Like sisters… true friends with whom I share a bond. That's true, isn't it? For both of you… you do trust me?"

"Of course, you idiot." Shishi snorted.

"Even though I'm the sister of the one who keeps causing all this trouble? Even though I couldn't save Jin?"

"You *tried* to save Jin." Hikari told her gently. "And you're *not* Miramu. Not even a bit like him, Myoume. Shishi's right. We've relied on you a lot — and of course you're part of the team. We're friends — all of us. And you can confide in us… of course you can."

Myoume chewed down on her lip, tasting blood on her tongue. Slowly she nodded her head.

"Hyoushin." She whispered. "Hyoushin is… the one I saw in those visions. *He*… is the… the man of peace."

Hikari's eyes widened, and she cast a glance in Shishi's direction, who shrugged her shoulders.

"*Hyoushin* is?" At last the schoolgirl found her voice, staring at Myoume in confusion. "*He's* your soul-mate?"

"I told you, that's *not* what it's about." Myoume shook her head impatiently. "It's clear enough now, isn't it? That the reason I saw him in that vision was all because of this. Everything… everything is because of this. Hyoushin's our ally — and I've almost gone and got him killed by not paying proper attention to everything Byakko told me. Maybe it's already too late!"

"Myoume, shut up and listen to yourself a minute, huh?" Shishi instructed, and Myoume raised an eyebrow.

"How can I shut up and listen to myself?" She demanded. "That

doesn't make any sense, Shishi-chan."

"Nor does what you're saying." Shishi replied smartly. "So you saw Hyoushin — so he's the man of peace — so what? He's come here… did you see whether or not he lived or died?"

"No…"

"Did you see that he was coming here to help us in the first place?"

"Well, not exactly, but…"

"Then what the hell have you done wrong?" Shishi demanded. "You had every reason to be suspicious of Kutou's chief Commander. And now you and Chichiri have been trying to help him — dammit, this isn't like you at all. You're starting to really creep me out, you know that? Get a grip on yourself, Myoume… if Hyoushin dies, it *won't* be your fault. And he already told Aoi everything he could — right? An' brought Maichu to fill in any remaining gaps. Maybe that's his role in all of this anyway… did you stop and think of that? That because you didn't see any more than just that image is because there *isn't* any more? That his involvement ends here?"

"That's sort of cold." Hikari chided. "If that had been Jin, Shishi…"

"But it ain't Jin." Shishi shrugged. "It's a stranger. A man we don't know at all, except Aoi… I don't understand why Myoume's so badly upset by it. Even if it does suck, histrionics is a bit much."

Hikari frowned, her hazel eyes softening as she glanced at the prophet.

"Jin was a stranger to Myoume too, Shishi." She said quietly. "When he died. And we know… Anara-san told us… that Myoume's visions sometimes made her very upset. She used her power in there, on Hyoushin, somehow, to put him to sleep. That's what's upset her. Her magic. You didn't see her use it in the circus camp, Shishi — but it's hallucinogenic. I guess it's only natural that it would upset her too, sometimes, to use it."

"Shit… that's true, huh?" Shishi eyed Myoume quizzically, and Myoume nodded, drying her eyes.

"Hikari's right." She agreed unwillingly. "Using my magic is something I hate doing. The things I see — they're things I get emotionally involved in but can't change. And when I reach across and make a connection to someone, it's like my thoughts mesh with theirs. For that instant, I know everything that they're thinking and feeling. I used my power on Hyoushin to bring him some relief, that's

all — not like the horrible way in which I used it in that town. But because I had to make direct contact with him, I saw inside his thoughts. That's when I realised who he was and how wrong I'd been. And because I did that… he's not a stranger to me now. You can't be a stranger to someone when you've read their thoughts like that."

Shishi sighed, slowly shaking her head.

"I don't really understand." She admitted. "But I guess I'm sorry if I was harsh."

"It's all right." Myoume managed a faint smile. "It's not your fault. And I'll be all right. I just… I guess right then I really needed people to cry to."

"Well, you have us, right?" Hikari dimpled. Myoume nodded.

"I do." She agreed. "And I feel better. Thank you. Although…"

She turned, her blue eyes clouding as she glanced across at the farm building.

"I still want him to live." She murmured. "Especially because it was Miramu's work… and because he's the man of peace. I need to know… what exactly that connection is. What kind of ally he's meant to be. I'm sure there's more I haven't perceived yet… he and I haven't even had a chance to speak except as enemies, and I'm sure now that that's not what Byakko meant at all. If that's so, he has to survive this. Somehow."

"You all seem very sombre out here." Chichiri's voice interrupted the conversation at that moment, and Myoume started, staring up at the sorcerer guiltily as he eyed her with a curious expression on his face. "Myoume-chan, you've been crying — and I thought you were staying with Hyoushin? Is something… has something…?"

He hesitated, and Myoume shook her head.

"He's sleeping." She said softly. "That's all. I just feel helpless about it… that he's hurt and it was Miramu who did it. If I'd realised a little sooner… I might have stopped it completely."

"We're *not* going to have that conversation again." Chichiri told her firmly, relief flickering in his ruby eye at her words. "There's no time for it, in any case. And you probably need to take a break — I'll head back and watch over him for a while now."

Myoume hesitated for a moment, then she made up her mind, nodding her head resolutely.

“There’s something you should know, Chichiri.” She said carefully. “Before you go back.”

“Yes?” Chichiri paused, eying her keenly. “Something important?”

“Yes.” Myoume gathered herself, then, “A long time ago, I had a vision about someone who would be an important ally for me… only he was obscured and I couldn’t make out his features. All I had to play with were two Chinese characters which I assumed represented someone’s name — the characters for ‘man’ and ‘peace’.”

“I don’t follow.” Chichiri looked bewildered. “What about them?”

“The person in my vision was Hyoushin, Chichiri.”

“But Hyoushin’s name uses the characters for ‘ice’ and ‘heart’.” Chichiri’s expression became even more mystified. “Aoiketsu told me so.”

“But that’s not his real name — it’s one the Emperor of Kutou gave him, but it’s not his true identity.” Myoume shook her head. “And it’s his *Meihi* name that means man of peace. That’s all.”

“His Meihi name…” Chichiri trailed off, a thoughtful look flickering in his ruby gaze. “I see. And this person you saw… is *definitely* Hyoushin?”

“I’m certain.” Myoume looked troubled. “And that he’s possibly the only one who the Emperor of Kutou will listen to. That must be why Byakko made me see him so many times when I was a child. And it’s definitely why his path and mine keep crossing ways. Because he’s our ally… someone in whom I can place complete trust. Someone that Kutou’s Emperor also trusts in. We have to find a way to save him. If one exists, we *must*.”

Chichiri was silent for a moment, then he sighed.

“I spoke to Tasuki, but he doesn’t think that using Celestial power on the man will be any help, and I think he’s right.” He admitted reluctantly. “The herbal remedies I’ve made Hyoushin swallow so far haven’t done much except touch the edge of his fever, and I don’t have an antidote. It’s a desperate battle, Myoume… I want him to live as much as you. But I don’t know if we can achieve it.”

“You’re not going to give up on him though, are you?” Hikari asked anxiously, and Chichiri rested his hand on her shoulder, offering her a tired smile.

“I never give up, you know.” He assured her. “While there’s life, there’s hope, after all. If we find something to try, Hikari-chan, I

promise we'll try it. Anything and everything — for Aoi's sake as much as any other reason."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Right now, though, I'll go back to the patient." He added. "Take some time, Myoume, and make sure you get something to eat, too. If there's any change, I promise — you'll be the first to know."

Myoume sighed, nodding her head as her gaze flitted back towards the stone building.

"I'll try." She agreed. "I just wish things were clearer right now, that's all. I feel totally lost… and I don't like the sensation at all. I need Byakko's guidance more than ever… I can't help but feel that bad things are coming and that we really don't have much time in which to put everything back to rights."

The woman in white was gone.

Somewhere in the swirling mix of dreams and memories, Hyoushin struggled to grasp hold of something tangible, disorientated and lost in the wash of emotions that swelled up inside of him. Just a few moments before, he had been drowning in shadows, but then, just as he'd been prepared to submit to the lure of his nightmares, *she* had appeared like an angel in the mist.

He had not known her name, or how she had come to be there. Her glimmering white form indicated she was not earthly, yet somehow he had had the distinct sensation that somewhere he had met her before. Perhaps it had been the flickering memory of another life-time, he wondered absently, searching in vain for any trace of her presence in his jumbled, ragged psyche.

But she was no longer there.

From the depths of the deepest sleep, he forced himself upwards, seeking the faint twinkle of light that sparked intermittently in front of his gaze. As he pushed closer and closer, he was aware of strange, disjointed sounds and the sudden combination of burning heat and searing pain, and he gasped, momentarily stunned by the sharpness of the sensation. The images that had cloaked him in comfort and safety began to fade away as little by little he became aware that the world inside his head was not the real one, and that he existed beyond the dance of delusion that had seduced his mind into fever and panic.

He drew a shaky breath into his lungs, fighting the urge to cough as pain stabbed through his chest, spreading slowly and doggedly across

his ribs as he fought to open his eyes. At first he was not able, but at length he managed it, the blur of strange colours making him feel dizzy and nauseous as everything around him span and swam tauntingly before his gaze.

He drew another breath, his chest throbbing as he did so, and as he struggled to move his limbs, he found that his normally more ready left arm suddenly seemed to weigh more than his entire body. Panic flashed through him as he realised he was unable to move it, and a fresh wave of dizziness washed over him as he jarred whatever it was that was causing him so much discomfort.

He blinked, drawing his surroundings into a rough focus as he tried to work out where he was and what had happened to him, but try as he might, he could not find anything familiar on which to focus his attentions. The room was small and unremarkable, the heavy drapes drawn shut at the window as if to block out the sun, and as he gazed at them, he became aware of how hot he was and that a raging thirst was working its way up inside of him. He parted his lips, struggling to form words but it was to no avail, as he was unable to produce more than the faintest of croaks.

There was noone else in the room with him, although at some point there must have been, for a bowl of water and a damp cloth lay on the unit near his makeshift bed, and absently he wondered who had been tending to him with so much care. A flickering memory of the woman in white danced across his senses at this, and he frowned, closing his eyes as he tried to separate reality from illusion. As he did so, a brief recollection of the archer in the forest stabbed through his thoughts and he drew breath sharply, remembering the mocking glint in Miramu's eyes and the sudden shock of pain as the arrow had made contact.

Before he could dwell on these fragments of remembrance, however, his exhaustion got the better of him, dragging him back down into the world of sleep as slowly he relinquished his grip on the reality of his surroundings. As he did so, even the pain that throbbed through his left side began to dull, and as he sank into oblivion, he saw the ghostly image of a woman watching him with troubled eyes, just beyond his reach. He tried to focus on her, but even as he did so, she faded and disappeared, and Hyoushin knew she had not been there at all.

"But earlier, she was." He mused, as he let go of his consciousness completely. "Somehow… in my thoughts. Someone tried to protect me… was it you, Bali? The maiden of the snow, defending a

bloodstained Meihi soldier from his own bad memories?”

That was the last thought he had, as he fell into a deep sleep, faintly comforted by the fleeting memories of the enigmatic stranger who had jumped between him and his tormented dreams.

Had he been able to see beyond the chamber, he would have seen the Byakko prophet glance in the direction of the house, anxiety in her gaze as she touched her fingers together in instinctive prayer. Of the fact that in that brief instant a bond had been formed between them he was oblivious, and yet, somewhere deep in his fever-driven slumber he knew that the woman had not just been his imagination. Somehow that flickering realisation that he was not fighting his demons alone gave him renewed strength, and his racing pulse steadied and slowed even despite the taint of the poison as he became determined that no matter what happened, he would not give up so easily.

Someone had believed in him, after all. Someone had protected him, and now, somehow, he would repay that faith.

No matter what happened, he was going to *live*.

Chapter 14

Chapter Thirteen

So, it had been just as bad as the reports had suggested.

As Kayu and his young companions crossed through Kutou's troubled southern province, the soldier reined in his horse, pausing for a moment as he glanced around him at the tell-tale signs of devastation littered across the land that lay before them. The area was peaceful now, with the occasional song of a bird as it flew from charred tree branch to charred tree branch, but Kayu knew better than to be fooled by the pretence of serenity. This barren, charcoal-scattered area of land had once been a thriving farming village, and as he surveyed it, his brows knitted together in consternation.

This was the place that Koku Maru had given his life fighting for his Emperor, and despite himself, Kayu felt something inside of him clench at the memory.

"*The people in the Southern Province aren't demons… they're just frightened of the people who've grasped power and they can't fight against them.*"

Even now Maru's words echoed in his head, and he almost thought he could visualise the soldier lounging up against the barracks wall, long tail of hair whipping in the wind and a warm grin on his face as he recounted his latest news.

"*That's why the Emperor deployed us — to protect them against those troublemakers. Things are going to be all right there, eventually. The people are starting to trust in the Emperor and his word — that he really does want to make sure they're safe. And that's why I'll keep going back. Because so long as its dangerous for them, we should be there. It's not the ordinary people of the Southern Province who cause so much suffering, after all. They're the victims, Kayu — and we're all that stands between them and devastation*."

"Maru was always so positive and resolute towards the people and the problems here." He reflected, his gaze scanning the remains of house posts and the skeletal blackness of dead, war-scorched trees. "He loved his work, despite the dangers — he enjoyed patrolling in the South and making a difference to the people and their lives here. It really seemed like nothing could ever bring him down, not so long

as he had so much belief inside of him.Yet in the end, this is where even he died, too. How many more people in Kutou need to pass away before someone realises that the Emperor only wants to bring peace?"

"Kayu-dono?"

The voice of one of his young companions startled him and he turned, casting the soldier a faint smile as he did so.

"Kayu-dono, why have we stopped here?" The boy, no older than sixteen years old suppressed a shiver, glancing at the barren landscape. "Everything here is dead and burnt — there's nowhere for us to stop for food or water or anything."

"We're not stopping here except to see for ourselves why the Emperor's sent us South." Kayu said gravely. "This whole area… the people here… who knows what horrible things they suffered at rebel hands. It's our duty to make sure it doesn't happen again. You all understand that, right? That we're not going to Kounan except to find the relic and Shinzahou of Suzaku in order to bring them back to Kutou."

"How will we know that it *is* the Shinzahou, though, Kayu-dono?" Another youngster eyed him doubtfully, and Kayu bit his lip, half wishing that he had had some of the more experienced soldiers to choose from when picking his companions to travel south. And yet, he knew that had he taken Ouno, Jakou or Bouri, it would have been difficult for him to maintain any kind of command over them. In any case, he knew that his older comrades would shortly be dispatched by Kintsusei to help consolidate the new Southern Garrison in this bleak, death-tainted area, and looking at it, Kayu rather felt he had got the best of the deal. After all, he was only passing through, and the scale of the responsibility on his shoulders told him better than anything that the Emperor still had faith in him.

He did not answer the boy's question immediately, gazing at each of the five young men that had been selected to come with him to Kounan. None of them were older than seventeen — the youngest barely more than fifteen — but all were promising and strong young fighters with the Emperor's name burnt firmly into their minds and their hearts. Their loyalty and obedience was unquestioning, and Kayu had the strange sensation that they had already accepted him as their new captain.

"Hyoushin-sama's treachery has caused shockwaves through the whole of Kutou." He mused to himself, tightening his grip on his reins as he contemplated this situation. "But if he truly is dead… Kikei-sama

seemed certain that he was. And yet, the Emperor also thought that sending Maru and the others to the Southern Province would suppress any further rebel risings there. Not everything is so sure. If the Commander truly was a traitor, then death is his only justifiable fate. But death in the South… can we trust any assassins sent so far from Kutou? I wonder. I wonder what exactly I'm taking these men to face after all."

"Kayu-dono?" The youngster pressed, and Kayu realised he had still not answered the soldier's question. He smiled again, spreading his hands.

"We don't know precisely what form the Shinzahou takes." He admitted. "But we do know the identity of the one who guards it. As I told you, our duty is to recover the girl known as Sukunami Hikari in order that our Emperor might speak to her about the treasure and its location. Kikei-sama seemed of the opinion that she keeps it with her at all times — in which case, locating her is imperative."

He twitched his reins, pressing his toes into his horse's flanks as he urged the beast once more into a canter.

"I've seen the girl in person myself." He added. "So identifying her shouldn't be difficult. She's about the same age as some of you — fifteen or sixteen, with long dark hair worn in an uncommon style, and hazel eyes. She will most likely be in the South-West region of Kounan… in the shade of the mountain that hides Suzaku's relic. That seems to be where our opponents are making their base."

"How much further do we have to ride, then, Kayu-dono? Till we get to the South-West?" A third youngster piped in, and Kayu shrugged.

"At least another day. Probably two." He hazarded cautiously, glancing up at the sky as he did so to plot their direction more clearly. "We're on a direct course, so it shouldn't be much more than that. We'll cross the border shortly using the smuggler's path and then we'll be within the south. Bear in mind, all of you, how you are dressed and how you must act once we are in the Phoenix's territory. Kutou's soldiers will only be treated with suspicion — keep your swords close, but do not reveal yourselves as military men. We're the Emperor's hope at the moment, and we can't let him down."

The was a moment of silence, as these heavy words sank into each of the young minds around him, then the first soldier spoke up again, tilting his head on one side as he eyed Kayu quizzically.

"Kayu-dono, is it really true that Hyoushin-sama was working for

the South all the time?"

Kayu bit his lip, shrugging his shoulders.

"I don't know what Hyoushin-sama's aims or motives are or were." He said slowly. "That's the truth of it. Such matters are only known to the Emperor and his principle ministers. All I know is that Hyoushin-sama was relieved of his command and exiled… and that is all the information I've been given."

"But doesn't it make you curious as to *why*?" The youngster pressed, and Kayu frowned.

"Questioning the Emperor's decisions is not our place." He chided, then faltered, realising how like his absent Commander such a reproach sounded. He swallowed hard, shaking his head as if to clear it. "Kintsusei-sama's sent us with a job to do. Hyoushin-sama's not any of our concern, and we shouldn't worry about it. The Emperor isn't a foolish man — he'll know what to do about it."

"I guess that's so." The soldier sighed. "Sorry. Just there are so many rumours flying around the palace, and I wondered… what the truth was. Since you're in Kikei-sama's trust, Kayu-dono, I thought maybe…"

He trailed off, reddening slightly as he realised the impertinence of his own words, and Kayu snorted, shaking his head.

"I'm a soldier, just like you. I'm not a government official." He responded. "It's not my business to know those things."

Yet even as he spoke the lie, he felt it choke up inside of him, as if somehow by speaking the words he was betraying the man who had commanded him for so many years. He frowned, his eyes narrowing as he remembered the scene in the Hokkan inn — Maichu's indignation, and the way in which Hyoushin had easily relinquished both his command and the Shinzahou into Kayu's own hands.

"Almost as if he knew something else, even then." He realised. "And took Maichu — why, though? Maichu's straight down the line — he's not easily persuaded to do deceitful things. But he's also not that smart when it comes to danger… and surely, not a discreet person to take with you anywhere, when you disappear? Hyoushin-sama seemed to have a contingency plan even when I sprang Kikei-sama's letter on him. To think he'd travel so purposefully south — to find Aoiketsu? Or to find Suzaku no Shinzahou?"

His eyes darkened with anger at this thought.

“A man who I trusted and who I looked up to in training to be a soldier turns out to be another enemy of the Emperor.” He muttered under his breath, kicking his horse to pick up the pace even more. “I can’t forgive him for that — or for involving Maichu or Aoi in any of this. Maichu’s fool enough to fall for anything, and Aoi’d believe every word the Commander said. Kikei-sama was right to tell me all the things he did… it’s up to me to extricate the two of them before death warrants and treason accusations rain down on their heads, too. For Kintsusei-sama’s sake, I have to be decisive… no matter what!”

The room was dark, the thick fabric curtains drawn across at the window as if to keep the bright Kounan sun from penetrating the chamber, and, as Chichiri slipped into the room, his gaze rested on the figure that lay in the slim pallet bed. His thick silver hair had been bound back from his face by Myoume’s careful hands, and at first glance he seemed to be sleeping, but as Chichiri drew closer the figure stirred, his eyes opening as they struggled to bring the newcomer into focus.

At the movement, Chichiri bowed his head slightly, sitting down beside the bed and setting the herbal remedy he had brought to one side. Although it was clear the man who lay before him was still extremely weak and fragile, his return to consciousness still brought relief to the sorcerer’s heart as he realised at last he could tackle the Meihi on the subject of Miramu’s poisoning techniques.

“So you are finally awake.” He murmured. “I suppose that means that my basic herbal remedies have done you some good at least — although I still don’t like the pitch of your fever, Hyoushin-san.”

“Who…” The man’s word was faint, and Chichiri noted the beading sweat on his brow. He frowned, moving to the window to draw back the heavy drapes and sunlight glittered across the chamber, brightening it in an instant.

“Ri Hou Jun.” He responded, turning back to the patient with a smile. “This is my home. And you’re Hyoushin of Kutou — the right hand man of Lord Kintsusei — correct?”

Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed, his fevered amethyst gaze flicking around the chamber as he sought to get to grips with his bearings in the sudden light.

“What is this place?” He asked softly.

“My home, in the Eastern Village.” Chichiri resumed his seat beside the wounded man. “In Kounan, at the foot of Reikaku-zan.”

“Kounan.” Hyoushin murmured, and Chichiri got the impression that faint shards of the man’s memory were returning to him little by little. He paused, then, “Where is Maichu?”

“Maichu is quite all right — and Aoiketsu too.” Chichiri assured him. “You were the only one hurt. Aoiketsu ran here for help, and this seemed the best place to bring you. You were attacked by the Byakko assassin Amefuri — but he’s gone now, and so long as Myoume is here, I don’t think he’ll come back.”

“Miramu.” A flash of cold anger glittered for a moment in the Meihi’s eyes, and Chichiri nodded.

“You were struck by his arrow.” He agreed gravely. “The wound itself is not serious, but we think it may have been laced with poison. Unfortunately we don’t know what that poison is. My remedies aren’t enough to purge your system of it… but Aoiketsu says you’re more familiar with Miramu and his methods than he or Maichu are. And if you can think of anything that might help you recover, we’ll do what we can to obtain it.”

Hyoushin frowned, eying the Seishi uncomprehendingly.

“Who are you, truly?” He whispered, and Chichiri thought he heard the edge of a lilting accent in the man’s words. “If you know so much… of who I am… why are you seeking to help me?”

“Because you’re not my enemy.” Chichiri said evenly, even as he realised that his companion was still somewhat confused and disorientated by the effects of the poison. “I fought in one war between Kutou and Kounan, and I regret that it ever took place. This time, I’m not fighting against Kutou. If the only way to heal this world is to help Kutou’s men, so be it.”

He shrugged his shoulders, reaching down to roll back the leg of his trousers and as he did so, Hyoushin’s eyes widened at the sight of the glittering red slashes across his knee.

“Suzaku.” He murmured, and Chichiri nodded.

“I am Chichiri.” He agreed. “One of Suzaku’s Celestial Warriors, as Miramu and Myoume are Amefuri and Toroki of Byakko.”

“Even less reason to h… help me, then.”

“Your Emperor seeks peace, doesn’t he?” Chichiri asked. Hyoushin nodded slightly, and Chichiri pursed his lips.

“So do all people.” He murmured. “In all lands. This doesn’t make us different, after all. And I believe your Emperor is an honourable

man. Equally, I know your loyalty to him is unquestionable — both Aoiketsu and Maichu have said as much. But it isn't Lord Kintsusei that worries me. Someone else at Kutou's court is the real enemy — the enemy of all of us, Kutou and Kounan alike. So long as he remains there, potentially in possession of so much power, none of the four lands are safe. And nor is the life of your King, Hyoushin-san. His existance is threatened just as sure as anyone else's."

Hyoushin was silent, digesting this, and Chichiri eyed him keenly.

"You know the man called Kikei?" He asked softly, and Hyoushin's eyes narrowed. Slowly he inclined his head.

"I do." He agreed faintly. "But you, I am sure, do not."

"No, only by name." Chichiri shook his head. "But Myoume — Toroki — believes a man of a tribe is behind the conspiracy to betray your Emperor."

"Then it could easily be me, could it not?"

"It's not you." Chichiri replied. "Your caution does you credit, but you shouldn't protect this man. He's a Priest of Seiryuu, but he's also a Hin — isn't he? Like Nakago, the Shougun who destroyed so many lives so long ago. He's of that tribe, isn't he? Myoume believes that he is our enemy. That he is the one who will kill us all."

Hyoushin hesitated for a moment. Then he frowned.

"As do I." He admitted softly. "I have no loyalty or faith in Lord Kikei. Nor do I seek to prot… protect him. But my Emperor does, and I do not wish to commit treason by speaking to a man of Kounan about the affairs of Kutou's court. I am already… in trouble enough for being… here."

He winced at this point, and Chichiri registered the rigidity in his body as he fought off the spasm of the fever.

"Right now, saving your life is our priority." He said gravely. "Because of all people, you might be the only one who can make Lord Kintsusei realise the danger he's in. Aoiketsu believes he trusts you more than anyone, despite any attempts to discredit you. And it might be the only hope for this world, in the end — the difference between life and death."

He bit his lip, a pained expression on his face as unwelcome memories came unbidden to his senses.

"I fought in the last war, and lost friends at the same time." he admitted. "I hated it, then. Now I have two young children, and I do

not wish them to grow up in the same kind of environment as the children born in that time. Children who lost parents, like the Emperor Reizeitei-sama. My family are precious to me — my son and daughter more important than anything else anyone could ever offer me. To protect their lives and their futures, Hyoushin-san, I would do anything. As a father and as a Seishi, I need your help. To protect all people, all families… but in particular, to protect my own."

A flicker of something crossed Hyoushin's gaze at this, and Chichiri realised he had hit a nerve somewhere, as the pale-skinned Meihi struggled to bring himself into a sitting position, pulling his blankets more tightly around his body as if protecting himself from unpleasant memories. Despite the severity of his condition, Hyoushin's amethyst eyes seemed already more alert as he pieced together the fragments of fact into one complete picture, and the sorcerer found he was glad to see it. Ill as he was, it was clear that Hyoushin had not yet given up the fight to keep his life, and Chichiri realised that he was dealing with someone whose will was not easily broken down by difficult circumstances.

"Be careful." He cautioned now. "Your wound has stopped bleeding, but it could start again. And you're not in any fit state to be moving around."

The Meihi hesitated, as if digesting this, then he frowned.

"Tell me why you are really here." He said quietly. "Chichiri of Suzaku. Why have you come to me, now? To save my life? Perhaps. To convince my Emperor of danger? Such a thing is my duty with or without your in… interference, even at the cost of my life. Why should it truly concern you? Aoiketsu seemed also so convinced… but I am… uncertain of your motives in h… helping me thus. You believe so much that Kounan too is under threat because of Kikei's deceit?"

"Do you believe in the visions of the Byakko warrior, Toroki?" Chichiri asked. Hyoushin sank back against the wall, considering the question carefully.

"I have no reason to believe or disbelieve." He said at length. "I know her only from when I took from her Byakko's Shinzahou in my Emperor's name."

"Are you aware that she and Miramu — Amefuri — are brother and sister?"

"Yes, though I do not see why this is important." Hyoushin's lip curled in distaste. "Miramu acts beyond the bounds of reason, and Toroki claims to see beyond them. That is all."

“Myoume has seen the destruction of this world. The death of everyone in it.” Chichiri said frankly. “Many things she’s predicted have already come true, including the death of someone considered a friend of my family. It was she who told me that the man betraying the Emperor of Kutou was tribal born… yet like me, she has never met Lord Kikei and knows nothing of him other than the visions she has seen. And more… Hyoushin, she believes you are important enough to Kintsusei-sama to make him listen to you. She seems to know you as well as anyone, even if you don’t think so.”

He paused, eying him keenly, then,

“Including the truth of your real name.” He added softly. “And it’s meaning — Man of Peace.”

At this Hyoushin started, flinching in pain as he jerked his injured body.

“What?” She whispered. “But…”

“Myoume sees things beyond anything we can.” Chichiri told him evenly. “And she believes that you might be the only one who can save your Emperor. More, that we — all of us — need to work together to save your land from destruction, because if Kutou gets destroyed, so will the other lands. Kikei seeks to purge this world of the things he sees as being in his way — but by doing so, he’s going to eliminate the very things on which life in this world depends. The stars in the sky over our heads… the four quarters represented by the four Gods and their constellations. Once, in the past, Kounan lost one of its constellations and the implications were far-reaching and frightening. To lose all of them at once… would spell certain death for this world.”

Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed as he absorbed this.

“This is Toroki’s prediction.” He said softly and Chichiri nodded.

“Suzaku’s Shinzahou has given us the same indication.” He added. “That something of great magnitude is coming. That someone will unite the four treasures and use the Beast’s power to ultimately destroy the Beast Gods and the world which they oversee.”

“I have never much been a man of Seiryuu.” Hyoushin admitted. “I act on my Emperor’s will, not my own. However…”

He hesitated, and Chichiri frowned, eying him keenly as he observed the sudden preoccupation that flickered in the Meihi’s odd amethyst eyes.

“What is it?” He asked gently. Hyoushin shook his head.

“The fevered ramblings of a dying man.” He said evenly. “It makes me indiscreet… and I say more than perhaps I should.”

“If we have any say in it, Hyoushin, you won’t be a dying man.” Chichiri said frankly. “I don’t believe in letting people die when there’s a chance they might live.”

Hyoushin eyed him for a moment, and Chichiri saw a flicker of acceptance in his still-fevered gaze.

“Aoiketsu said similar things.” he murmured. “That you were one in whom I could trust — that if I… I came to your village… he thought you would hear us and help us. Yet… you must forgive my caution and reticence. With Miramu on my trail… his poison means death, and that would be a curse brought upon your people, had I come here sooner. Even my being here now… when your attempts may yet be fruitless.”

“You don’t need to apologise for thinking things through before acting.” Chichiri said frankly. “And as for the poison, the fact you’ve managed to wake yourself up is a good sign. It suggests your body is still fighting it.”

“I cannot take full credit.” Hyoushin frowned. “At least… I think… someone helped me back to the surface.”

“Someone?” Chichiri eyed him sharply, and Hyoushin inclined his head.

“A woman dressed in white.” He murmured. Then his lips twitched into a wry smile. “Although it was perhaps a delusion brought about by high temperature. I felt that someone was with me… even within my thoughts… but I am sure it makes no sense that anyone was.”

“A woman in white, huh?” Chichiri looked pensive, remembering the stain of tears on Myoume’s cheeks and the way she had spoken with such certainty about Hyoushin’s true identity. “Well, I don’t know anything about that, but whatever it was, I’m glad to have the chance to speak to you. I hoped you might know more about what this poison is…”

“I do not.” Hyoushin shook his head slightly. “I believe Miramu uses many, some herbal, some not — and I am not a man who approves of his methods. I have learnt to fight with a sword, not with cowardly weapons — so our acquaintance has never been on amicable enough terms for that kind of trust of information.”

“You have no idea at all?”

Hyoushin sighed, and Chichiri could tell that, despite the length of their conversation so far, his companion was fighting a painful battle to draw each breath into his lungs to speak. He bit his lip.

“You’re not up to this, are you.” He said quietly. “But I don’t know what else to do. I’m making your pain worse, and I’m sorry… but…”

“I have lived with pain before. I do not fear it.” Hyoushin said pragmatically. “Physical pain can be borne, Chichiri. I am equal to it.”

He sighed again, and for a moment Chichiri realised how vulnerable and raw the rising fever was rendering his emotions.

“It is the mental pain I fear.” Hyoushin murmured. “The return of memories I seek to suppress. In this state, it is hard to be rational and composed. I have many things I would rather not consider… however… in these things there is one thing that might..answer your question. If you… you truly seek to help me, and help my master in Kutou.”

“I’m listening.” Chichiri said gently. “What do you mean?”

“When I was a boy of six, I was b… bitten by a snake.” Hyoushin murmured. “The symptoms were… much like this. The physician of our settlement had a remedy… which purged the poison from the wound and allowed healing. I do not know what it contained, however. Or what snake it was that bit me. However I believe… that Miramu uses venom of some nature to slay some of his victims. Those of which he wants to make certain, since herbal potions can often be expelled or eradicated with the right knowledge. Snakes are another matter — their bite usually means death, regardless of the species. When he attacked me, he did make cryptic remarks to that effect — I believe he thought it didn’t matter if I knew the manner of my death, although he was not explicit as to the species. Still, that may be why I am still able to fight this, so far. Because I have battled it once before, and won.”

Chichiri looked thoughtful.

“A *Meihi* remedy?” He asked. Hyoushin nodded.

“Yes.”

“But you can’t tell me what it was made of?”

Hyoushin shook his head.

“I was six years old.” He repeated. “I am thirty five now — you

cannot expect me to recall such details over almost a thirty year period. And there was no reason for me to know, in any case. I was never old enough a tribesman to be app… apprenticed to any craft, and medicine would probably not have been my choice if the opportunity had arisen."

His amethyst gaze flickered with pain, and Chichiri could tell that it was not all caused by the injury to his left side. He sighed, resting a hand on the wounded man's good arm.

"I'm sorry." He said honestly. "I have no idea what you've been through, or what memories this is raking up for you, especially in the state you're in now — to make you suffer is not my intention. I know only too well how easy it is to be haunted by the ghosts of the past, and how much a person can seek to escape them. But I have to ask you this. If you don't know the componants of the remedy — is there anyone I could go to who would?"

"Not unless you plan on making many days journey into the snow of Hokkan." Hyoushin said bitterly. "The only surviving settlement of Meihi I know of who live in peace shelter on Koku-zan, along the path to the peak. My sister is among them. But from the south, it is many many days travel. Ten, at least, I'd wager. Perhaps more."

"Not necessarily." Chichiri glanced thoughtfully at his hands, then, "This settlement is on the slopes of Koku-zan?"

"Yes, but…"

"And the people there… would they help, if I asked? Would they even understand me?" Chichiri asked. "You speak Kutou's dialect to perfection, but I'm pretty sure that's not your first language, is it? The Meihi have their own language… would they know what I wanted, if I went and spoke to them in Chinese?"

"You are a fool if you think you could make such a journey and back within a shorter space of time than three weeks." Hyoushin said pragmatically. "By which time the poison will either have spoken for me, or I will have overcome it on my own. Or, if you are correct about Toroki's vision, we might all be dead."

"I could do it in an afternoon. Maybe less, if I knew precisely where I was aiming." Chichiri said pensively. "I know Koku-zan. An ally of mine is buried at the peak — so that shouldn't pose me too much of a problem."

"An ally…?" Hyoushin frowned, then, "The burial, with the barrier of red light…"

“Yes.” Chichiri agreed. “The resting place of Nuriko, a dear friend of mine who died in the cause of helping Kounan.”

“So it was indeed Suzaku’s work protecting that grave.” Hyoushin reflected. Chichiri smiled.

“In a way, you know.” He agreed. “Actually, it was my magic. I’m a sorcerer by nature, Hyoushin-san. I grow herbs and sell them in memory of my comrade Mitsukake, who was a doctor and a healer, but my own gifts are bent more towards spiritual magic of varying levels. And that includes suppressing and transferring my life force to other places through a medium — I could go to Hokkan and return in a matter of an hour or less, depending on how long it takes to produce such a remedy. My question to you is simply whether you think they would help me.”

“The Meihi are not like other peoples. They act in peace and friendship.” Hyoushin said quietly. “They would seek to help. And many of that settlement were former slaves of the East, like I was. I imagine they picked up enough Chinese dialect in those days to understand you. I did, after all, and the language between the four lands is not so different as to create a barrier. A matter of accent, perhaps — but even so, not enough to be a problem. Besides, the man who holds leadership there is named Bakaru, and he is a Seishi of Genbu’s calling. And he speaks your language with near as much fluency as I do.”

He frowned.

“It would seem that Suzaku’s power is as wide ranging as Seiryuu’s, then, if you are truly able to travel such a distance in so little time.”

“I can.” Chichiri nodded. “And I meant what I said about my family. And about the innocents whose lives would be affected or ended by all of this. That’s why I exist — to protect those lives, even if it kills me. And if that means helping Kutou, I will help Kutou. My mission is always to protect the people of Kounan — and if the way to do that is to help resolve Kutou’s suffering, so be it.”

Hyoushin stared at him for a moment. Then a faint smile touched his lips, and Chichiri realised they’d reached an accord.

“You are as I am.” He murmured. “You are bound to your loyalties and your hopes. You spoke, before, as if you understood the difficulty of discarding the past. Suzaku’s work brings suffering, then? And yet you still act in this way?”

“As you do.” Chichiri agreed. “My entire village was wiped out by

flood when I was eighteen… I survived because of Suzaku's power, but everyone I loved was swept away and killed. For a long time, I couldn't accept it. But Suzaku… Suzaku kept me for this purpose. And now I have a life of my own again. A family. A wife I care about, children I adore. I told you — as a Seishi, I will protect Kounan. But as a husband and father — I will defend my family to death, if need be. No matter how high the cost."

Hyoushin's eyes closed for a moment, and Chichiri could tell he was remembering something. At length, he nodded.

"When my settlement was ravaged by Kutou's soldiers, I promised to protect my siblings and my mother from harm." He said softly. "But I was ten years old… and I failed. My father was slain in front of me, and I know now that my mother was also murdered, my younger brother and sister taken as slaves as I was. My brother died in slavery… I was not able to protect them, no matter how much I wanted to. But there are children in Hokkan's Meihi settlement. And there are children in Kutou, also, Chichiri-san. Children who know nothing about the evils of Shoukitei's regime or the slavery that flourished. There are slaves still in bond, because my Emperor's grip on the land is still challenged by rebels and dissenters. Like you, I do not wish to see another generation suffer the way my sister and I both did."

He smiled again, opening his eyes, and Chichiri found himself somewhat reassured by the renewed glitter of life in the amethyst gaze.

"Tell them… that Lilaihi sent you." He said softly. "My sister's name is Lirayi, and if she knows you have come from me — to help me — she will no doubt ensure you get what you want, if it is possible to do so."

"Lilaihi. Lirayi." Chichiri repeated the names slowly, then nodded. "All right. Lilaihi is your real name, then? The one that means Man of Peace?"

"Meihi by definition translates as Tribe of Peace." Hyoushin inclined his head slightly. "It is as you say."

His fingers moved to his throat, fingering the black pendant that still hung there. He hesitated, then began to clumsily unwind the fastening with his right hand.

"Take this, too." He added. "Then she will be certain you truly have come on my errand. The character is 'Rayi', hope — it may help you to locate my sister, if you have trouble making yourself understood,

for it is the second character that makes up her name."

He loosened it, holding it out, and Chichiri took it, running his fingers over the smooth ebony rock. He nodded.

"I will do as you say." He agreed. "Thank you, Hyoushin. Hopefully I can help you help me, now. And help you recover, too. Aoiketsu and Maichu are both very worried about you, you know."

"They are good men." Hyoushin nodded. "But then I have always known it of them both."

He frowned, then,

"Chichiri, one other thing."

"Yes?"

"I would like to speak to… to the girl called Hikari."

"To Hikari?" Chichiri eyed him keenly. "Now why would you want to do that? And particularly when you're in no fit state for long conversations — even this one has put your will to live under considerable strain."

At this, Hyoushin offered a vaguely rueful smile.

"To survive, one must be strong." He said simply. "Life is as it is — to find courage to live it is up to the individual. Whatever that life brings."

He drew a shuddering, painful breath into his lungs, then,

"Aoiketsu told me that girl is Suzaku's treasure." He said softly. "But she is also the person I came here to see most of all. For my Emperor's sake, to see if she truly is Seiryuu no Miko, as I now believe she must be."

"I see." Chichiri faltered, pursing his lips. "You know that's something we've not discussed with Hikari at all, yet."

"Still, the legend of the Miko is that, when the land faces devastation, the Priestess will come from the other world. Is it not so?"

"Yes… why?"

"And you believe Hikari *is* a true Miko, don't you?"

"Yes, I do." Chichiri admitted. "But although the signs are all there… I'm not convinced yet about what path we should be taking."

“I will help you.” Hyoushin said softly. “So long as our goal is the same — and I believe your words, Chichiri. Suzaku’s you might be, and born in Kounan, but you are an honest man, and I believe what you say. So I will assist you — and approach my Emperor, if I am able to do it. So long as I may speak to the girl — and explain to her the needs of Kutou.”

“Toroki also says she’s Seiryuu’s Miko.” Chichiri sighed. “But she’s such a young girl, and Seiryuu is such a powerful beast… even though it’s almost certainly that way, I’m not sure how to bring the news to her or even suggest that she might take it upon herself to raise him. I haven’t forgotten what almost befell Hongou Yui when she attempted the same thing — and Hikari is the child of very dear people to me. I don’t want her to be hurt.”

“I am not well enough versed in the legends to know all you probably do.” Hyoushin admitted. “But Kutou faces destruction. The Seishi are already destroyed, but the Shinzahou are not. Your land is only in danger by default — not because something is actively attacking it. Kutou is the land crying out for help. If Seiryuu has any claim to protecting the East… would it not make sense that it be through this girl? Given that, will you ignore her destiny?”

He smiled slightly.

“Besides, the Seiryuu mage Suiko predicted that uniting the four Shinzahou would bring Seiryuu no Miko into the picture.” He added. “How many girls are there from the other world in this one at present? And more, if she truly possesses the power of Suzaku’s Shinzahou within her — Suiko’s portent is correct. If the four were to be united in Kutou… surely there would then be a Priestess of Seiryuu who could save the Eastern lands as much as harm them? Hikari is Kutou’s last hope. And I must speak to her… even if it kills me, I *must*.”

Chichiri stared at him, then he muttered a curse under his breath.

“I know you’re right.” He admitted unwillingly. “And that it means… Hikari…”

“Has to go to Kutou at some point.” Hyoushin inclined his head. “And risk encountering Kikei’s ambition and treachery.”

“Something which I also know, but had been trying not to consider quite so plainly.” Chichiri chewed on his lip. “Still, right now, I’m going to Hokkan in search of something to counteract snake venom. And *you* should rest. But later, I’d appreciate it if you told me whatever you could about Suiko’s prediction and what you know.

Whatever you can tell us without betraying Lord Kintsusei — Hyoushin, I think we really do need your help. And in return… in return I'll do as you ask. I'll make sure… you get to talk to Hikari. About Kutou, and raising Seiryuu."

Hyoushin sighed, sinking back against his pillows as he closed his eyes.

"The Southern Lands have been Kutou's enemies for a long time." He murmured. "To align with men of Kounan to save the East seems a strange kind of irony. But I have trust in your word. I have trust… in you."

Chichiri grinned.

"Good. That saves time, you know." He said briskly. "Aoiketsu already understands the severity of what we need to do — and he wants to save Kutou too, which is why he became involved with us in the way that he is. He and Maichu are as welcome as you are in my village and my home whilst you are recovering. You have my word — to me, Kutou is not the enemy. It never really has been, you know — just evil men of ambition within it. The ordinary people suffer as much as the ordinary folk did in Kounan during Nakago's raids. We are not so different. And I'm glad you understand that too."

"As you say." Hyoushin said softly. "I will endeavour to keep breathing until you return, Chichiri. I would like to be of some use in the saving of my homeland."

With that he was asleep, and Chichiri paused only to pull the blankets more securely over his fevered body before leaving the chamber, closing the door softly behind him.

"Chichiri?" Aoiketsu was waiting for him in the hallway, and at the sight of him, Chichiri paused, offering the young man a smile.

"He's come around, and I've spoken to him — he's regained rationality." He said gently. "But he's very tired, Aoi — I don't want you to disturb him right now. He's told me something that I might be able to use to help him — at least, I'm going north to speak to his people there, in the hope they really do have a remedy for his symptoms. Can I trust you not to go in there until after I return? If he can sleep a while, I think it would do him good."

"I promise." Aoiketsu looked relieved. "That he's awake is a good sign though, isn't it?"

"Hopefully." Chichiri agreed, remembering as he did so what Hyoushin had said about the white woman who had invaded his

thoughts.

“If Myoume wants to watch him in my absence, she’s more than welcome.” He said at length. “With her family’s apothecary background, I think she’s the only one who should… will you tell her where I’m going and what I said? If my mission is successful, then with any luck you can speak to your Commander later… but for now…”

“I understand, and I’ll tell her.” Aoiketsu promised. “Just so long as he’s okay, I’ll do whatever you tell me.”

Chichiri grinned, clapping his hand down on the young man’s shoulder.

“I thought your dedication to him was strong.” He reflected. “Having spoken to him a while, I understand it. I want to help him too, you know. I think he’s as good a man as you’ve told me… and with any luck, we won’t let Miramu win this round.”

He paused, then,

“I want you to keep a close eye on Maichu, however.” He added. “Miramu isn’t here, and I know that if he did come, Myoume would see him off. But even so, her other prediction remains and we don’t know the full implication of it yet. So, can I trust you with that task?”

“Maichu’s my friend, so it goes without saying.” Aoiketsu nodded. “In fact, I’ll take him up to Reikaku-zan and see if we can convince Tasuki to give him back his sword… that way at least if trouble came he could defend himself.”

“I don’t think Tasuki will hurt him. I spoke to him and Shishi seems to have done so, too.” Chichiri assured him. “Going to the mountain is a good idea, however — do so. It’ll give you both a break from the pressure here and for the time being you’re the one Maichu’ll trust most of all.”

“Yes, but he’ll trust in all of you if I do.” Aoiketsu said simply. “He’s that way — if he trusts someone, he believes in them. And we’ve been friends a long time.”

“So I realise.” Chichiri nodded. “I’m beginning to think that there are some very respectable soldier attitudes in the East after all, you know.”

“Well, Hyoushin-sama trained us.” Aoiketsu spread his hands. “I hope you find what you need in Hokkan, Chichiri. I’ll take Maichu and go to the mountain — hopefully by the time we get back things will

have improved!”

Chapter 15

Chapter Fourteen

The Shouryuu was running high through Seisen as Kayu and his band of young travellers crossed into the village's territory, dismounting their horses as they negotiated rooms for the night in the only local inn. Seisen had once been part of mainland Kutou, and even now its correct geographical alignment was somewhat dubious, but after a long day's riding Kayu found that he didn't care either about the politics or the awkwardness of spending the night in a place that had such wary ties to his homeland. On the river's far bank was Kounan, and in the morning they would head over the sturdy stone bridge into Suzaku's country, bypassing the usual border patrols that had been all the more severe since the re-emergence of unrest in the East.

It had been a long day's travel, and with his loyalties still so torn within him, Kayu found he was glad to dismiss his men to find food and drink, slipping away once he was sure they were well occupied as he surveyed the peaceful village scenery.

Seisen was rumoured to be beautiful, and as he walked through the rows of Eastern-style brick houses he realised that despite how much it had suffered from flooding in the past, the accounts he had heard had been correct. As he crested the brow of a small hill, he saw the bridge that led into the Phoenix's land, and he approached it hesitantly, running his fingers against the carved stone as he pondered the details of his mission one more time.

"Aoi and Maichu… the Shinzahou… the relic. Sukunami Hikari, too." He murmured, counting them off in his head as he did so. "So few of us for so many tasks. The Emperor really is counting on me… I mustn't let him down."

He took a step or two onto the bridge, gazing down into the fast-flowing, dizzy river water as he did so. Maybe it was his imagination, but he thought he saw the glitter of silver scales as fish danced and played beneath the surface, and for an instant he envied them their free, easy movement. Though Seisen had Eastern roots, it did not share Kutou's civil unrest, and for some reason he felt resentful towards the local people for wresting their independance away while the pillars of the Eastern capital had been crumbling in the dust

around Nakago's final assault.

It was a limbo, he acknowledged wryly to himself. A no-man's land that served neither Seiryuu nor Suzaku with all its heart. And yet to him, patriotic as he was, he still considered it territory that fell under his Emperor's troubled crown.

"You look deep in thought, nii-san." A woman's voice startled him and he jerked his head up, reddening slightly at having been caught so off guard. The stranger was about the same age as his Commander, with thick wavy hair pulled back in a common married style and robed in fabrics that would not have been out of place in any of the villages within Kutou's boundaries. Bright, sparkling eyes told of a warm, open personality and somehow Kayu felt at ease with her, even though they had never met before.

The woman offered him a smile, clearly amused by his confusion as she held up her hands in apology.

"I startled you. I'm sorry." She murmured. "You just looked like the weight of all the world was on your shoulders."

"The world, no." Kayu sighed, shaking his heads. "But weight enough, for sure."

"You're travelling through Seisen?" The woman asked him curiously. "You're not local, but you speak with Kutou's accent. You're heading South, then? To the Phoenix's land?"

"I have business with contacts in the South West." Kayu agreed, immediately drawing on his merchant's cover as he nodded his head. "But it's a long road and a treacherous one. Many of my fellows have been killed taking the path between the heartland of Kutou and the Southern border. But Seisen is meant to be a haven of peace and I felt that here would be a good place to stop the night as a result. It hasn't failed my expectations so far."

"Ah, well, Seisen isn't exactly part of Kutou these days." The woman shrugged her shoulders, eying him with an amused smile. "Though I'm sure Lord Kintsusei would have other things to say about it. But because we're not the East now, we don't share it's taint. This is always a peaceful place, now."

"How?" Kayu questioned. "I mean, with war so close — and especially in the Southern Province. How can you keep so secure?"

"Ah." The woman's eyes twinkled. "That's almost a secret, you know. A special arrangement made between a friend of this village and friends of his who live far from here."

“A… secret?” Kayu’s brows knitted together. “Surely it can’t be something to conceal, the secret to keeping Seisen-mura’s peace?”

“I suppose not.” The woman relented, shaking her head. “We have Imperial protection, that is all.”

She gestured to the land around her.

“More than twenty years ago now, a young man almost drowned in this river.” She added. “My father and I pulled him out, and in return he helped to save our village from flooding. That man was Suzaku’s Chichiri — and he has never fully released his connections with this place. As a result, the Crown of Kounan have always ensured that we have protection if we need it. We are not part of Kounan, but we are Kounan’s ally. And Kutou are wise folk — they know when not to push the issue.”

“Kounan…” Kayu bit his lip. Then he frowned, shaking his head.

“I don’t know about the politics of it.” He murmured. “But I wish it was so easy for all of Kutou. Still, relying on the intimidation tactics of your neighbours… is that really freedom, when you look at it closely?”

The woman stared at him, then she laughed.

“You are an astute young man.” She remarked. “What is your name? You can’t be old enough to remember the terrible war, surely?”

“I was two or three when it was fought.” Kayu shook his head. “I don’t remember it, but my family were killed during it. My name is Hei Kayu — although that was the name given to me by the man who rescued and raised me afterwards. My original family name was Sai — but they were wiped out to a man during the conflict. So I remember the aftermath quite clearly.”

“I suppose so.” The woman’s expression softened. “Then I’m sorry for your loss — and I hope that you see the same peace in Kutou soon as we have here.”

“So do I.” Kayu said fervently. “It’s what I hope for more than anything — that the Emperor of Kutou no longer has to fear rebels and treason and that Kutou can prosper again. With… with or without Seisen-mura.”

“Indeed.” The woman laughed. She spread her hands, bowing her head towards him amiably.

“My name is Ryuu Kouran.” She continued. “My family have lived in Seisen always — my husband and I grew up here together and

we've both seen the land be devastated and reborn in that time. Our children have grown up here too, and I'm sure theirs will, in the future. Peace is a wonderful thing — and I do think that's what it is. Hou Jun wouldn't allow it to be any other way. This place is treated with kindness and respect by the crown of Kounan because it's a place so dear to Chichiri's heart… and so long as that remains so, we're Kounan's friends. Not their subordinates."

"Even so, it seems a peculiar arrangement." Kayu admitted. "I don't see the benefit to Kounan to do such a thing."

"Some things are done simply from friendship." Kouran shrugged her shoulders. "One day, I'm sure, Kutou and Kounan will be able to reach out hands and share in the same kind of alliance… even if it takes its time in coming."

"I don't know." Kayu glanced back down into the water. "Maybe one day, although I don't know whether it'll be in this lifetime or the next. There are a lot of scars that haven't healed yet… and a lot of people are afraid of another war. Kounan's army is strong and cohesive… and Kutou is still very divided. People fear invasion more than anything else, I think."

"Then you can put your mind at rest, Kayu-san." Kouran shook her head. "The Emperor of Kounan is not that kind of man."

"I suppose time will tell." Kayu pursed his lips. "Though I hope you're right."

"Will you stay the night in Seisen, Kayu-san?"

"Yes, that's the plan." Kayu agreed. "My me… companions have taken rooms at the local inn and I'll join them shortly. I just wanted to see our route for tomorrow. It's the first time I've led the party, and I want to make sure we get to our destination smoothly."

"To see friends in the South-west?"

"Business associates… but yes, I suppose you might call them friends." Kayu agreed. Kouran smiled.

"I almost envy you. I've never been far into Kounan, though I'd like to have found the time to." She admitted. "I know there are great mountains, lakes and valleys in the South-west — a beautiful place, green and full of life."

"So it is." Kayu could not keep the wistfulness out of his voice, and Kouran chuckled, resting a hand on her arm.

"Your friends can spare you a little longer, I hope?" She asked

gently. “I’d like to hear more about your trip… and your prior visits. Won’t you come eat with my husband and I tonight? My daughter is already preparing a meal, and we can certainly feed you.”

“But my companions…” Kayu faltered, then his eyes narrowed as he remembered her mention of the Suzaku warrior Chichiri. Slowly he nodded his head.

“No, to refuse such kindness would be rude of me.” He corrected himself, bowing his head apologetically. “And my guardian would be upset if he thought I’d behaved dishonourably in any way. Thank you, Kouran-san. I would like that — and I would also like to hear more about this village’s peculiar friendship with Kounan. The rapport between you and Suzaku’s people — it gives me hope that the same might happen in my own land, so I’d like to hear the whole tale… if it wouldn’t inconvenience you to tell me.”

“Not at all.” Kouran was surprised. “I don’t ever mind telling people about Hou Jun and his visit to our village. He’s a very special kind of a friend to us here… the day the dragon rose from the river is a day that lives in my memory forever. If you really want to hear it, I’ll tell you, of course.”

“I really do.” Kayu offered her a smile. “Then I accept your invitation wholeheartedly. Let me just pass a message to my comrades so they know my whereabouts — then I would be honoured to accept your hospitality.”

Kouran dimpled, nodding her head.

“Do so.” She agreed. “The house is the third on the right, just beyond the great tree. I’ll look forward to it, Kayu-san.”

With that she was gone, and Kayu headed slowly in the direction of the inn, his expression thoughful.

“So will I.” He mused. “I know little about Suzaku’s people except what Kikei-sama told me, and I have yet to meet either Chichiri or Tasuki in person. Yet Chichiri was here — and more, he shares a connection with this village that is strong enough to gain them Reizeitei-sama’s protection without his overlordship. Such a thing is peculiar… I need to understand what it is about this man. He is a sorcerer — this I know. But to go into his territory unprepared… it would be a risk indeed. Whatever I can learn from Kouran-san and her family will stand us in good stead. After all… after all, if we’re going after Sukunami Hikari… we might just wind up facing this Chichiri person sooner or later… and for Kintsusei-sama’s sake, its a battle I don’t intend on letting us lose.”

So Chichiri had gone North.

Myoume stepped into the sick room, casting a glance at the patient as she pursed her lips. Inwardly her emotions tore at her as she took in the uneven nature of his breathing and the sweat that beaded his brow. Even despite her own intervention, and Chichiri's remedies, she knew that he was losing his fight against the fever's grip, and that the toxin had begun to spread to his chest, labouring the drags of air he fought to pull into his lungs. Although she knew Chichiri had gone to find a remedy, it was only too clear that Hyoushin's determined grip on life was faltering as his strength began to give out, and despite herself, she felt a lump rise in her throat, panic washing over her at the thought of letting the Meihi's life slip away.

She frowned, fighting to regain control of her emotions. It was unlike her, she knew, to feel so personally involved in a stranger's fate, and yet, as much as Jin's passing had upset her, she knew that her connection to Hyoushin was somehow stronger than that. By breaking through his consciousness and into his memories, she had strengthened the tentative bond between them, and although she didn't understand the reasons, she knew more than anything that she did not want the Meihi to die.

She sighed, coming to sit beside the bed as she slipped a gentle hand behind his shoulders, guiding him into a more upright position. He let out an involuntary gasp of pain that shot through Myoume's senses, but she steeled herself, instead reaching for the spare pillow as she added it to the pile already supporting his back.

"You'll breathe more easily this way." She said softly, and the Meihi cast her a questioning glance.

"Toroki?" He murmured, and Myoume nodded.

"Our paths continue to cross." She said evenly.

"Why are you… bothered… by my suffering?"

"Because I don't like to see it." Myoume said frankly. "Especially not when its my brother's handiwork."

Hyoushin's eyes clouded slightly, but he did not respond, and Myoume nodded her head.

"What you did in Sairou, taking the Shinzahou from me… is nothing to what my brother's done to you and to other people." She added quietly. "And you could easily have killed me in the West, had you wanted to. Still you didn't. Isn't that worth something in terms of

my kindness to you now?"

"I… doubt it." Hyoushin's breathing was still hampered, and although he fought to conceal it from her, Myoume could tell that each breath was causing him considerable pain. "If you… had wanted… to fight…"

He faltered, and Myoume shrugged.

"I suppose I did let you win, rather." She agreed. "But it's the past now. Let's leave it there, shall we? We both have the same enemy now — and we have to work together if we're to do anything to help your country."

Hyoushin frowned, then he nodded slowly.

"If… not for… that… I would not be fighting… so hard to… breathe." He murmured. "My body would… rather I stopped. Even since… Chichiri left… I can feel… that the toxin is…"

He trailed off, closing his eyes briefly, and Myoume felt her heart clench as she registered how hard he was working to keep conscious.

"You're in a lot of pain, aren't you." She said gently, and Hyoushin sighed, opening his eyes once more.

"I have… always been… resistant to pain." He said softly, his voice barely more than a hoarse whisper. "My past… at least… taught me that. But…"

He hesitated, and Myoume rested her hand gently on his arm.

"Fever causes hallucinations, and unlocks things you'd rather stayed locked away." She said quietly. "I know, Hyoushin. I know."

At this he cast her a startled look, then his eyes narrowed.

"How could… you understand… that?" He gasped out, and Myoume bit her lip, holding up her hands apologetically.

"I'm sorry." She confessed. "But when you were delirious, I… I invaded your privacy, and broke through to your thoughts. I know it was unforgivable to use my power that way, and I… I feel really bad that I did. But I didn't have much choice."

"The woman in white…" Hyoushin's eyes opened wide with shock and realisation. Then they clouded, as the full implication of her words sank in.

"How much… did you see?"

"Enough." Myoume said vaguely. "But I swear, I won't repeat any

of it to anyone, not ever. Your private thoughts are your own and I won't share them. I wouldn't have taken the actions I did, only I had to do something to bring you out of your panic. Your heart wouldn't have stood it — and I need you to live, Hyoushin. Kutou needs you to live, and so do I. So…"

"*You*… need me to?" Hyoushin looked faintly confused. "So you do… not have… to bury… another… of your brother..'s victims?"

"It's too complicated to even begin to explain when you're not fully fit." Myoume responded evenly. "And I don't think I fully understand it myself. I just know… that's how it is. And in any case, you have enough to worry about without adding my eccentricities to your list."

Despite himself, Hyoushin smiled slightly.

"You*are*… strange." He acknowledged. "And yet… I am… not angry. You… were indeed… the woman I saw, weren't you? The ghost who stepped into… my thoughts… and protected me… from myself?"

"I'm afraid so." Myoume agreed, twisting her hands together absently as she spoke. "I didn't expect quite so much… I mean, I hadn't registered exactly how much you had been through in the past. It was difficult to be rational, when I was so close to your own feelings — and I acted a little bit more impulsively than I intended to. Still, in the end… it did the trick. Somehow."

"Then I should… thank you." Hyoushin pursed his lips. "Even for the intrusion of it. So long… as you… do not… repeat… to anyone… what you saw."

"I swear on the honour of the Tiger of the West." Myoume said solemnly. "On my life and everything it stands for, too. I won't ever betray your memories to anyone."

"It is odd." Hyoushin murmured. "Considering… to this point… we have been as foes. But… you seem… to understand. Like… Chichiri. You… really… do not seek… to hurt me."

"Not at all. It's honestly the opposite." Myoume shook her head. "To which end…"

She glanced at her hand, then carefully slipped her glove off, glancing at the glittering white character that glowed on the tip of her index finger. She held her hand out to him.

"I can make the pain easier." She said gently. "Both physical and mental, if you like. Till Chichiri gets here. I can't… I can't alter the effects of the poison. I'm not a healer. But I can dull the edges of it. If

you'll let me break into your thoughts again… it might buy you some time."

"Even if… I forgive your… earlier… intrusion… I don't… like people… in my head." Hyoushin responded. "Even if once… was unavoidable. I am not… dying yet."

He drew a painful breath into his lungs, wincing as he did so, and Myoume knew that, despite his words, he was weakening in his fight.

"You've survived as long as you have through will alone." She observed, sitting back as she observed him. "But even you must have a limit. You should swallow your pride, Hyoushin. I truly won't betray anything I encounter in your thoughts… you have my word. We all have nightmares we'd rather keep hidden, and I can understand why you deal with yours in the way that you do. I won't dig any deeper. I'll only do what I said — dull the pain and suppress things for the time being."

"The coward… in me… wants to say yes." Hyoushin murmured. "The gentle… feeling you brought… before… helped me… to fight back. But… even if… such cowardice… has got me thus far, I will not let… it guide me… further."

"How, exactly, are you a coward?" Myoume snorted. "Don't be stupid. You're a long way from that. Whatever your flaws, Hyoushin, you don't lack for courage."

"Then why… am I so… afraid of my own… past?" Hyoushin arched an eyebrow. "So much… that I needed… the interference of… an outsider to… conquer it? I… have… avoided the… obvious. I have… not questioned enough. And now…"

He coughed, his words lost as pain flickered once more across his expression, and instinctively Myoume reached out to support him, feeling the hot dryness of his skin against hers as she held him still.

"You're not a coward but you are a fool." She whispered, tears glittering in her eyes. "Let me stop this… or you won't be here when Chichiri returns!"

"Toroki?" At the emotion in her tone, Hyoushin's head jerked up, and he stared at her in confusion. "Am I really… so important… in Kutou's survival?"

"You're important. Leave it at that." Myoume said firmly. "So stop being silly and let me help you. Aoiketsu, Maichu — they're both worried about you. You're more to them than just a Commander who barks out orders… they have faith in you, too. But your body can't

stand up to this alone. You must know that."

Hyoushin sighed, and Myoume felt his tense form go limp against hers.

"I cannot fight." He muttered. "It is pathetic. But… I… cannot… breathe like this… indefinitely. Every breath… has become… a conscious… effort, more so… since Chichiri… departed for… Hokkan. My body… seeks to… give in. If not… for Kutou… I would stop… fighting it. I… cannot keep… going like… this. I… cannot."

Myoume swallowed hard, nodding her head.

"Then I'll send you to sleep." She said gently. "I can knock you out like I did before, and then you won't feel anything at all."

"No." Hyoushin shook his head gingerly. "I… will not… sleep. I must… not. If I… do… my breathing… will surely… still. It will… be my last… sleep. But…"

He stopped, and Myoume interpreted the silence. She sighed.

"If that's how you want it, I'll meet you half way." She agreed reluctantly, pressing her exposed index finger down gently against the Meihi's arm. As she did so, he flinched, letting out a faint gasp, and she shook her head.

"Don't fight me." She ordered. "I know it's hard, but you have to let your barriers down and let me in. I won't hurt you, I promise."

Hyoushin did not answer, but very slowly Myoume felt the barrier to his thoughts yield, and she was suddenly flooded with a wash of emotion and pain, fragmented images merging into one vivid memory as she forced herself to keep going. She was there to suppress the memory, and to dull the pain, she reminded herself. She must not let her own emotions become wrapped up in what she did — she could not become distracted. To stay detached from the things she was seeing, that was her only defence… and she knew that the chances of her maintaining her own composure against Hyoushin's dark memories were slim.

"I'm too tied to him." She realised. "Since the last time, or maybe before — beyond anything I even understood was possible. My man of peace is real… and he's here. He's right here. A man I can trust… is that truly all it is? An ally in this fight? It confuses me so much and I can't make head or tail of what it means. The way Hikari spoke in Choukou — maybe I wondered for a brief moment if she was right. But that's madness… I know that much now at least. I've met him now — when the both of us may yet die fighting for Kutou. Myself, in

particular. I can't become distracted — I know what I must do and till I've completed Byakko's tasks I can't stop and think of anything else. But even with that said, one thing I will make sure of first! I might not save my own life — but I*won't* let Miramu take Hyoushin's!"

This resolve seemed to strengthen her and she gathered her wits, closing her eyes as she focused her energy on the taunting, cruel memories that danced before her. In her mind's eye she extended her hands, a soft white haze engulfing them as she sought to confine Hyoushin's nightmares in a secure, reassuring cocoon of Byakko magic. It was harder this time, for he was conscious and aware of everything she did, and no matter how carefully she moved around his thoughts, she was aware of the occasional flinching or tensing of his body as she went about her work.

She gritted her teeth, unwilling to retreat until she had completely isolated the dark memories back where they had come from, and as she worked to shield the pain impulses from the forefront of her companion's thoughts, she was gratified by the sound of his breathing easing. She let out a sigh, suddenly weary as she drew her hand away from his skin.

"There." She whispered, as she gently guided him back down onto the raised pillows. "I did my best. Is it better than before?"

Hyoushin did not answer at first, his eyes closed, and for a brief instant Myoume was afraid she'd gone too far and dulled his senses in sleep anyway, despite his wishes. But then he let out his breath in a rush, his amethyst eyes meeting her indigo ones. At their expression, Myoume's heart clenched in her chest, and it was all she could do not to let out an exclamation. Far from the usual, reserved glance of the Meihi Commander, she saw a flicker of the man's true humanity in his gaze, as genuine gratitude touched his expression.

"Miramu spoke of your power as sinister, but he lied." He murmured, the hoarseness gone from his voice. "And I was wrong, too. You are *not* like your brother in the least. Where he harms, you seek to do the opposite."

Myoume smiled, blinking back her tears.

"It's not easy, doing something like that on a conscious, aware subject." She admitted. "And I have… I can use my power for uglier ends, if the need arises. But… I don't want to make you suffer any more than you already are. I told you — it matters to me that you live. Even if just because I doubted in your integrity once and have been proven wrong. If I can help Chichiri save your life, I will — I'm

not willing to sit back and let you die."

Hyoushin eyed her for a moment. Then he smiled, and once again Myoume was touched by the genuine, unreserved nature of the expression.

"I am indebted to you." He whispered. "Perhaps it is not my lot to die after all. Not… yet."

"Not yet." Myoume echoed, shaking her head. "Definitely not yet. Maybe not for many years, yet. You're young still, after all."

"Thirty-five summers." Hyoushin agreed. "That is all… though it seems like plenty."

"Time enough to have a life, then, after you've done your duty." Myoume said evenly. Hyoushin eyed her pensively.

"You understand more than you should, saying things like that." He reflected. "You've seen my thought processes far too clearly."

"All living things seek to live, not to die. At least, they should." Myoume responded. "Even ones who have suffered. Your instinct was always survival — that's all. Your memories are awful, Hyoushin. But even so, running through them is that determination to live — to survive somehow, no matter what. That's why you're still living now, I'm sure. Why Miramu's poison hasn't killed you yet. Because more than anything, you've always fought to live."

Hyoushin inclined his head slightly.

"Perhaps you are right." He agreed. "I was ten years old when my life was stolen from me. I would like the opportunity to claim it back… even if I do not know how to do so. By serving Kintsusei-sama and by bringing peace to Kutou I can repay my debt to him and honour the memory of the slaves who died in servitude… slaves like my brother. Maybe then I will have a chance to live for myself."

"Strangely, I understand the sentiment better than you think." Myoume sighed, a wistful expression flickering in her indigo eyes. "To live for oneself… must be a pleasant thing indeed."

"You sound like its something you have no chance of achieving."

"Miramu will kill me, when next we meet." Myoume said frankly. "Such is the nature of Toroki's sight — I've known for a long time that such a confrontation must happen. And I am not a killer. I haven't that instinct. Miramu is still my brother… no matter what he's done, I can't hurt him. But he… he told me we were no longer siblings, and that he was simply the western assassin… the shadow. So… in the end, that

will decide matters. My time is limited."

Hyoushin was silent for a moment, and Myoume was startled to see a faint flicker of compassion and regret in his amethyst eyes.

"Your gift is as much a burden as my memories are to me." He observed. "My past and your future… we both have weights we must carry somehow."

"Yet we must move forward." Myoume managed a rueful smile. "For the sake of this world, Hyoushin — we *must*."

The mountain slopes were still dusted in a sheen of soft white snow as Chichiri made his landing on Koku-zan's impressive rock face, pausing for a moment to get his bearings as a wave of nostalgia washed over him. Memories of another climb many years earlier pricked against his senses, and he frowned, biting his lip pensively as he gazed across the ground towards a distinctive twist of pinewood thrust deep into a mound of snow. Slowly he approached it, holding out his hands towards it as the barrier he had long since erected there sparked and danced with ruby light.

"Nuriko." He murmured. "Sorry, old friend — for using you as a point of reference. But of all places on Koku-zan, this place is burned forever into my memories."

He eyed the grave for a moment, noticing with approval how the elements had not worn at the wooden marker nor disturbed their hard work.

"My barrier has held fast all these years, even though your spirit is long gone from this place." He reflected, bringing his hand up before his face in an automatic gesture of prayer. Then he faltered, smiling ruefully as he glanced at his fingers.

"Old habits die hard when in the company of former allies, it seems." He murmured sheepishly. "Well, even a man such as me can pray without the robe of a monk. I'd like to stay here longer, but I have other things to do. There's a Meihi settlement somewhere between here and Touran, and I hoped that I might be able to see it from here. After all, time is of the essence. Hyoushin has a strong will, but he is still just a man and a man can succumb to poison far too easily. I won't waste my time on nostaglic remeniscences."

He turned, moving to the edge of the cliff as he gazed down into the valleys below. The cold wind whipped against him, teasing at his long tail of hair and his grip on his *kasa* tightened as he realised that

although it was summer in the south, in Hokkan the seasons had barely changed.

"I wonder if that's because Genbu's been preoccupied with other things." He wondered absently. "Or if nature's just dealt the north a particularly long, harsh winter this year. I don't know… it seems odd. Even when I've travelled in Hokkan before, it hasn't always been so cold as this. The levels below the mountain should be clear for grazing. Is it truly still snowing even in the lowlands? This can't be a coincidence. It must be because things are out of balance again."

He frowned, sniffing the air as he picked up the faint scent of wood smoke and he turned, squinting against the bright glare of the snow as he picked out the source of the smell. In the midst of the white, almost hidden by heavily-laden pines and the lie of the land, he thought he saw what might be the roofs of buildings, and his good eye widened as he realised what it was he had found.

"The Meihi village. Midway, just as Hyoushin said." He murmured. "Right. Then I can see it… I hope I can transport to it based on that. It's well hidden… but that's undoubtedly the place I'm looking for. And time is of the essence, so I'll just have to take the chance."

He gripped his *kasa* tightly, murmuring a spell as he brought his hand down before his face in a firm, decisive movement. As he closed his eyes, he felt the world around him swirl and twist, pulling him into the dark expanse of space and then out again as he dropped carefully down on the soft white surface of snow once more.

He opened his eyes, relief flickering inside his heart as he realised that his impulse had been correct and that he had landed not far from a ring of stones that seemed to mark a territorial boundary. Beyond these strangely carved markers, he could see the walls of houses unlike any he had seen before, and faintly he was aware of the sound of laughter on the wind as small figures ran and played between the buildings. Although there was a nip in the air, Chichiri did not sense that these young children were aware of it, and even as he suppressed a shiver of his own, he remembered what Hyoushin had said about the Meihi and cold.

"Truly snow people, then." He murmured to himself, sliding his hand into the folds of his clothing, his fingers brushing against the black-stone pendant. "The Meihi of the mountains. I hope they can help me."

He stepped resolutely over the stone boundary, pausing to survey the scenery and as he did so, he became aware of eyes on him. He

glanced up, seeing that the children who had been playing so freely had stopped their game, pausing to stare at this odd stranger who had suddenly appeared in their midst. Despite himself, Chichiri's fingers automatically went to his scarred face and he frowned, worried that his unconventional appearance might have frightened them.

"I'm not one of them, and I look like this." He berated himself. "Not well thought out, Hou Jun."

One of the children darted forward at that moment, peering up at him as she pulled gently on the fabric of his sleeve. She said something in a gentle, lilting tongue, and Chichiri gazed at her in surprise, unable to understand her words but sure from her gesture that she was not afraid of him. He eyed her curiously for a moment, and the girl repeated her gesture, tilting her head on one side as if waiting for an answer. She was probably about the same age as his own daughter, he realised, with the ice-fair complexion of her tribe and big, amethyst eyes that glittered with life. Unruly silver curls framed her face, making her appear almost ethereal, though a faint flush to her cheeks told of robust health in the brisk mountain air of the tribal settlement. Something about the guileless nature of her greeting touched the sorcerer's heart, as he remembered Hyoushin's words about the Meihi tribe.

"Greeting people as friends and not fearing them as enemies." He reflected. "Though they have great reason to fear those from outside. This child is the same as Meikyo — she looks different, true, but her trust and her innocence are the same. Hyoushin is right — all children deserve a chance to grow up in a free world. These can because their parents fled the East… but even in the East things have to begin to change sometime. Children are children after all. Noone's born an enemy… they're taught to be it, or otherwise."

The girl said something else to him at that moment, drawing him back to the present with her soft, lilting words. She eyed him hopefully, and Chichiri sighed, shaking his head.

"I'm sorry." He admitted. "I don't understand your words."

At the sound of the harsher Chinese dialect, the girl's eyes widened, and she turned, saying something in rapid, urgent speech to her younger companions. In a moment they had dispersed, leaving him alone with the young girl who was obviously the oldest of the group. She eyed him carefully for a moment. Then she moved her fingers in an odd gesture, offering him a smile. She held up her hands, and Chichiri knew she was telling him to wait, although what he was waiting for was unclear. He did as he was bidden, however, gazing

around at the small settlement as he did so.

It was not big, yet nor was it tiny, with several of the odd dwellings dotted around the flat of the mountain land. All around the edges were mountain pines, and in the centre was something which resembled a well, although the design was unlike anything Chichiri had seen before. Though he and the small girl were the only ones outside, he got the feeling that, behind the security of their curtains he was being observed by other members of the tribe as they tried to work out who he was and what his mission among them had been.

At length one of the younger children re-emerged, an older man in tow, and at the sight of him, the little girl darted forwards, saying something in rapid, excited Meihi. The man eyed her for a moment, then he smiled, patting her on the head as he nodded. He said something to her gently, gesturing towards the houses beyond, and the girl's grin widened as she grabbed the young boy by the hand, skipping off towards the property that he had indicated.

For a moment, Chichiri and the stranger eyed one another. Then the Meihi raised his hands in the same gesture that the girl had made earlier.

"So, another visitor has stepped over the boundary of our village." He said softly, in clear, if accented Chinese. "How may I help you, stranger? You do not look like a man of war to me… yet appearances can be deceptive."

"I'm no man of war." Chichiri held up his hands hurriedly, relief flooding his heart at the fluency of the other man's speech. "Are you… by any chance, are you Bakaru-san?"

"Yes, that is my name." The man was startled. "How came you by it, stranger?"

"Thank Suzaku for that." Chichiri sighed. "I've come looking for you — or you and your companions, to be more accurate. I realise I'm intruding on the peace of your settlement and I'm sorry… I'm not usually so ill-mannered as to trespass into a place I've not been invited. But this is a matter of some urgency… I need your help."

"My… help?" Bakaru eyed him in confusion. "I don't understand. On what errand have you come here, my friend? And who are you? I cannot help a man who does not have a name."

"Ri Hou Jun." Chichiri said simply. He paused, then shook his head. "No, that's deceiving you, and I mustn't do that. I want your help honestly, and I came to ask for it in the same way. I can feel from the

flicker of your aura that you're one half of the soul known as Urumiya — Genbu's man of the stars. And if that's the case, I'll appeal to you as one Seishi to another… I am also known as Chichiri of the south, a man of Suzaku's choosing."

He hesitated, then drew back the leg of his trousers to show the glittering red mark on his right knee, and Bakaru's eyes widened.

"Suzaku." He murmured. "I see. So this is a stellar visit? If it is Genbu's treasures you seek, my friend, I cannot help. These are things I do not have."

"I haven't come for Genbu's treasure." Chichiri recovered his symbol, shaking his head. "I've actually come on another errand. You are acquainted with a man called… called Lilaihi, aren't you?"

"Lilaihi?" Bakaru's eyes narrowed. "Somewhat… by what manner do you know this name, Ri Hou Jun-san?"

"From his own lips." Chichiri said frankly. "I'll be honest, since there is no time to hesitate. Hyoushin… Lilaihi… is currently in my village in the South. He's suffered an injury and I seek to help him recover from it. But it seems he's taken some poison in and I have no way of curing it. My family are apothecaries, but limited in this area. He told me that you… might have a way to cure him. And I came by way of my Suzaku magic… in case it was true."

Bakaru stared at him for a moment. Then he nodded.

"You are honest." He murmured. "I feel it from you — you speak the truth. Yet when I saw him last, Lilaihi was certainly not seeking the aid of Suzaku's men. And your news concerns me… that he should be so hurt, in the pursuit of his duties…"

He sighed, then beckoned towards his companion.

"Come with me, Ri Hou Jun-san." He said quietly. "We will discuss this in the seclusion of my home — after all, if it concerns Lilaihi, there is another who should know of it."

"Li… Rayi-san?" Chichiri asked, and Bakaru started, then nodded his head.

"Yes."

"Hyoushin gave me this." Chichiri pulled out the black pendant, holding it out. "He said that if I took this to you, you'd know that I'd come on his bidding. He said Lirayi-san made it — that the character on it is from her name, although I can't read your language. He said it meant hope… and that you'd recognise it if I showed it to you."

“Indeed.” Bakaru looked surprised, taking the pendant and glancing at it. “Rayi’s craft is very distinctive… and this is her pendant. That he gave such a thing to you, and told you its history… Lilaihi has placed his trust in you, or so it seems.”

“Suzaku and Seiryuu are not really fighting one another, but another enemy we had neither one of us perceived.” Chichiri said sadly, following the older man into one of the dwellings as Bakaru shut the door behind them, blocking out the chill of the mountain air as he gestured for his companion to take a seat. Chichiri did so, sinking down against the soft-woven fabric as he cast Bakaru a hopeful look.

“So you will help me?” He asked softly. Bakaru spread his hands.

“If I am able.” He said cautiously. “I need to know more of what has befallen Lilaihi before I can tell you any kind of answer. A Meihi only gives his word if he intends to keep it — I cannot promise to help you until I know if it is within my capabilities.”

Chichiri stared at him, and Bakaru’s expression softened slightly.

“If I can do anything to help Lilaihi survive, I will do it.” He added. “I am fond of him, foolish and stubborn though he may be. And for Rayi’s sake… I will do what I can for her brother. But the Meihi are not magicians. We are just men and women with ordinary skills. If your Chinese methods have no cure, I cannot guarantee ours will.”

He smiled, gesturing towards the sorcerer as he took a seat himself.

“You look like one who has already been in the wars, my friend — I suppose even the expertise of Kounan’s physicians can’t do anything about the loss of an eye.”

“Well, yes and no.” Despite himself Chichiri returned the smile with a rueful one of his own. “I lost it in the flood that destroyed my village, which was more than twenty years ago now. I did have an opportunity to heal it, but I decided… for my own reasons… it was better to live the way I was. But your young folk weren’t at all perturbed by the sight of it — which surprised me. In my own village, of course, the people are well used to the one eyed eccentric who potters around the place at all times of day and night. But here… with me being from outside as well…”

“Our children don’t learn to look at someone’s appearance, only at the way they are inside.” Bakaru told him softly. “It’s necessary, you know… many people here have been slaves. Several wear the scar on their cheek — others have suffered more debilitation or disfigurement

than that. Some of my fellows have lost hands, fingers, ears… yes, one or two have sacrificed their sight in order to find their freedom. So the children learn from the moment they're able that people aren't how they look. They're how they feel. And as for you being from outside — to most of the youngsters here 'outside' means the market in Touran where the people are both tolerant and friendly towards us. They don't know the things that us older Meihi do… they've not been so tainted by that past."

"I see." Chichiri looked interested. "Yes, I suppose that makes sense. This is a peaceful place — a haven — despite all the things that the people here must have once been through. It's refreshing to find that outlook — it's been a long time since I travelled with a mask to hide my missing eye, after all."

"There's no reason to hide anything here." Bakaru told him evenly. "The Meihi are not like other people… they do not like to judge."

"Bakaru?" At that moment, a fresh voice came from the doorway, and Chichiri glanced up, his eye widening as he took in the figure of a woman staring at him uncertainly. She faltered, her gaze flickering to her older companion, who smiled, gesturing for her to enter. As she did so, Chichiri got to his feet, bowing his head towards her even as he observed the unevenness of her gait, the faint clouding of her left eye and the distinctive, familiar white curl of a scar on her cheek. Yet, despite these imperfections, she was clearly much younger than his impromptu host, and although the marks of her past were clearly visible, she was not unattractive. Gazing at her, Chichiri thought he saw a fleeting resemblance to his stricken Meihi acquaintance back in Kounan, and in an instant he realised who this stranger was.

"Lirayi-san?" He asked softly, and at the sound of her name, the woman's head jerked up as their gazes met fully for the first time.

"This man has come from Kounan, Rayi." Bakaru spoke in slow, gentle Chinese, and Lirayi's expression became confused. "He has been sent by Lilaihi."

"by Oniichan?" Lirayi gazed at Chichiri anew, and Chichiri nodded his head.

"He needs help from his people." he agreed, and Lirayi's gaze darted back towards Bakaru, who held out the pendant. He said something in Meihi, and Lirayi's eyes widened, fear flickering in her gaze as she grasped the black stone to her chest. She hugged it tightly to her, staring at Chichiri in horror.

"Lilai-nii..is hurt?" She asked softly, in uneven, hesitant Chinese.

“How is this?”

“He was attacked… and he’s been poisoned.” Chichiri said carefully. “He’s been quite unwell. I came here because I hoped that you could help me find an antidote.”

“Antidote?” Lirayi murmured. “Poison? What poison is?”

“We don’t know.” Chichiri admitted, frustration in his gaze. “Hyoush… Lilaihi said that when he was a boy, he was bitten by a snake and that it had the same kind of symptoms — fever, hallucination, burning pain and paralysis near the site of the wound. But it was a long time ago and he doesn’t remember clearly what the remedy was. All he knows is that the Meihi had some such remedy for snake poison — if indeed we’re dealing with the same kind of snake.”

Lirayi glanced at Bakaru, who murmured something in Meihi, and Chichiri realised that in his desire to explain the problem, he had spoken too fast for the younger woman to understand. He bit his lip, battling his impatience as Bakaru carefully explained his meaning, and as he did so, Lirayi nodded her head emphatically.

“Oniichan was bitten.” She agreed. “But… I… I was… baby then. No remembering it.”

“No, I realise you must have been very young.” Chichiri agreed. “But even so — if there’s anything you can think of — either of you — that can help me to heal him…”

“You… want help Lilai-nii?” Lirayi asked hesitantly. “You… his friend?”

“Yes.” Chichiri agreed, realising as he did so that he meant what he was saying. “Yes, I suppose that’s it. And I do want to help him live, Lirayi-san. He’s suffered enough… and he has a lot of things he believes in doing.”

“He promised… come get me… when work is over.” Lirayi said slowly, the glitter of tears in her eyes. “Must cure him, Bakaru… *must*!”

“If we can.” Bakaru agreed. “Certainly we can ask Mikoyi if he has any remedies that might help.”

“Mi… koyi?” Chichiri repeated, and Bakaru nodded.

“The settlement’s healer.” He responded. “Although… you believe Lilaihi’s injury was caused by a snake?”

“Snake venom. Yes.” Chichiri agreed. “Why? What about it?”

“Joyilaei.” Lirayi murmured, and Chichiri stared at her, nonplussed.

“I’m sorry… I don’t understand.”

“Joyilaei is a type of snake that is common among Meihi settlements.” Bakaru explained. “Along the southern border of Hokkan and the northern boundary of Kutou, these creatures are numerous. Their bite is highly toxic — causing paralysis, delusion, fever and death. Joyi is the Meihi word for nightmare. Laei is the Meihi word for snake. Such is it called, in our tongue.”

“I see.” Chichiri frowned. “A snake that populates the north of Kutou… which is where Hyou… Liliahi and Lirayi-san are originally from?”

“Yes.” Lirayi nodded anxiously. “Many Joyilaei there. Many, many. Father drove away with sticks — bites made people very sick.”

“Sick — but didn’t kill them?”

“Meihi cured with herahisa herb.” Lirayi shook her head. “Not die. But sick. Very sick.”

“I think Rayi’s right.” Bakaru’s expression cleared. “You said that Lilaihi was suffering from fever and hallucinations, didn’t you, my friend? The poison of the Joyilaei is not quick acting, but if not treated quickly can be fatal. However… if he had been bitten by the same snake before, he would have developed a little resistance to it. Perhaps his memory is correct. Maybe he has been unlucky enough to be struck twice by the same beast.”

“And there is a cure?”

“Possibly.” Bakaru rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I believe that in your language, the name of this snake is ‘gendoku-ja’ — though I might be mistaken — the illusion venom snake. In my time as a slave, I remember that the masters were very anxious about this particular beast — it was considered an ill omen within Kutou, to have one cross your path. To be bitten by one was certain death for anyone at that time. They did not use herahisa — or seem to know the remedy. And I remember that death was not swift nor pleasant for any struck by the creature’s fangs.”

“Gendoku-ja.” Recognition flickered into Chichiri’s ruby gaze. “That means something to me. On my travels, I’d encountered the stories of that snake — the one whose bite brings madness, paralysis and death. How did I not make that connection myself? The creature doesn’t exist within the far south of Kounan, where I live — the climate is too hot

to sustain it, I think. But I've travelled all over the four lands in my life. I should have been more aware."

He frowned.

"Herahisa is another Meihi word?" He asked. "I grow many herbs, but I don't know that one."

"That's because only the Meihi realise its true value." Bakaru said ruefully. "It is an invasive, stifling plant if not kept under good control, and it is generally seen as a weed in other places. Only here, we know its benefits and cultivate it accordingly. It is strong enough to grow anywhere, after all — in the coldest snow or hottest desert, herahisa has the luck and strength to thrive. And the leaves provide an antidote for the poison of the gendoku-ja… although not without some side effects. Still, considering the situation, I think…"

"Mikoyi." Lirayi said quickly, and Bakaru nodded.

"Go, find him." He agreed. "I will speak some more to our unexpected guest. Don't look so frightened, Rayi-chan. We will do what we can to help your brother, I'm sure."

Lirayi's gaze clouded, but she nodded her head, making a strange gesture of farewell in Chichiri's direction before withdrawing from the room. As the door shut behind them, Bakaru sighed heavily.

"She has lived for so many years not knowing if her brother lived or not." He said softly, and Chichiri was aware of the pain in his eyes. "She always believed… she clung onto that faith that somehow Lilaihi had survived, even though she had seen her parents and her other brother cruelly killed. Lilaihi had promised to come back for her, you see — and she held onto that belief for as long as I knew her. When he came here, not so long ago, I saw her face truly light up with joy for the first time. And yet… now…"

He bit his lip.

"He said he had to complete his Emperor's business, and intimated that Suzaku was his enemy." He continued. "Yet here you are."

"There have been a lot of misunderstandings." Chichiri said softly. "He still seeks to protect his Emperor. And I seek to help him. My friends and I."

"And Seiryuu no Miko, no doubt?"

"Seiryuu no…?" Chichiri stared, and Bakaru nodded.

"The young girl." He agreed. "Kutou's Miko, yes?"

“Yes.” Chichiri agreed. “But how did you…?”

“I am Urumiya, at least in part.” Bakaru reminded him. “I know more about the Gods and their ways than the average Meihi.”

“And more Chinese too, thankfully.” Chichiri said ruefully. “Hyoushin said that you’d help me — that you’d understand, and you have. If more people took your attitude, the world wouldn’t need saving.”

“Perhaps.” Bakaru looked thoughtful. “Although the Meihi have always pulled away from the outside world, too. They do not judge, but they also do not mix — most Meihi will never learn to speak Chinese, so communication about our ways and thoughts with people beyond our lands is almost impossible to do. That creates fear and misunderstanding… no, in truth I rather admire Lilaihi’s conviction to do what is right and not to ignore the suffering of the land in which he was born. He has suffered too, Hou Jun-san. Like all of us, he has lost his family and been a slave. Yet even despite that… he wants to free Kutou. It’s a noble thought… don’t you think so? To not hate the land which caused him pain, but to want to free it, instead?”

“Yes.” Chichiri nodded his head. “But I’m beginning to realise that he’s a very resolute kind of person… and if he believes in something, he’s not easily swayed from that purpose.”

“A Meihi never gives his word lightly.” Bakaru replied. “But once he has, he swears it heart and soul and only death can break it. Lilaihi has learnt those values — even if he lives as ‘Hyoushin’ and serves at Kutou’s Imperial Court. He is still a Meihi at heart… and those values make him strong now.”

“It strikes me that Kutou’s court could use a fair few more Meihi, if that’s the case.” Chichiri said ruefully. “Or at least, their poor Emperor certainly could.”

“So it seems to me, also.” Bakaru admitted. “Lilaihi’s loyalty to that man overrides even his wish to stay here in safety with his sister. Yet I understand that sentiment, Hou Jun-san. Till you have had freedom taken from you, you don’t appreciate what it means to have it returned. And had I been rescued by such a man — whoever he might be — I too would be willing to risk everything to help him.”

Chichiri’s expression softened as he gazed at this older man, the faint white pattern of a slave scar still faintly visible on his own pale cheek. He nodded slowly.

“Maybe when we’re done, there won’t be any people in this world

who understand freedom being taken away." He said quietly. "I have children myself — my daughter is about the same age as the young girl who first greeted me within the village, and my son is little older. I want them to grow and thrive in a free, peaceful Kounan, you know. But even if Kounan is peaceful, this world isn't going to stabilise and settle down until all of our neighbours are quieted too. We've closed our eyes to Kutou's problems far too long — that almost makes us guilty by omission, doesn't it? But I think it's changing. Little by little I'm understanding better what it was Suzaku asked of us this time around… and with any luck, we'll succeed in completing his and Seiryuu's requests."

He shrugged, his ruby eye darkening as he remembered the gravity of Hikari's original prediction.

"After all, we have to." He concluded. "In the end there's not really much leeway for failure."

Chapter 16

Chapter Fifteen

"You know, considering the severity of the situation, Hyoushin, I didn't imagine it would be quite so difficult to make you drink the remedy."

Chichiri sat back in his seat, a look of amusement on his tired features as he glanced from the vessel in his hand to the patient who lay still propped up by pillows in the makeshift bed. He had returned from Hokkan half an hour earlier to find that Hyoushin was still fighting against the effects of the venom, and after a few minutes discussion, the Meihi had agreed that Lirayi's theory about the source of Miramu's poison had probably been the correct one.

And yet, when it had come to the actual remedy itself, Hyoushin had been reticent to drink it, eying it with a mixture of wariness and loathing as he had put it to his lips.

"Herahisa." He said softly, and Chichiri nodded, setting the vial down beside the bed as he folded his hands in his lap.

"That's what Bakaru said." He agreed. "Herahisa. It seems like pretty powerful stuff — I brought some seeds back with me to try and grow some myself. The settlement physician wrote the formula down for me in Meihi script, which I can't read, but I hoped… maybe when you're feeling a little better, you might help me to decipher it?"

"That depends on how much more of the stuff you intend on forcing down my throat." Hyoushin said darkly, suppressing a shudder as his gaze fell once more on the empty glass vessel. A faint greenish residue coated the bottom, and the vague scent of powerful mixed herbs still lingered in the chamber, despite the fact that all the windows had been pushed open as far as they could go to allow air into the warm, stuffy chamber. At his expression, Chichiri chuckled, slowly shaking his head.

"And yet you already seem better." He observed. "A patient who fights back is a patient who lives — at least in my experience. What's so terrible about herahisa if it's saving your life, Hyoushin? Miyoki-sensei seemed quite certain that it was powerful enough a potion to absorb at least half of the toxins in your body, even though you were attacked early this morning. He said that within twenty four hours of

the attack the remedy is still likely to save your life — you shouldn't treat it with such loathing. Surely it's better than being under the influence of that venom?"

"It is easing." Hyoushin admitted reluctantly, shifting slightly on his pillows as he struggled into a more comfortable position. "The heat makes it hard to know if it is my fever or the general temperature of the day. But the pain in my side is less than it was… and I am able to breathe better. Between Myoume's ministrations and that potion you have brought, I think perhaps I may yet fight it off."

"Myoume, now?" Chichiri eyed him keenly. "It was 'Toroki' when I left."

"Perhaps it was." Hyoushin agreed, and Chichiri was surprised to see the flicker of something deep in the amethyst eyes. "But she seems to prefer her real name to her stellar one."

"I see." Chichiri pursed his lips. "So my instincts were right — she *did* have something to do with your condition changing as it did."

"Her powers are mysterious and incalculable, yet she managed to bring me some relief by using them." Hyoushin acknowledged. "Yes, Chichiri. It seems I have been suspicious of foreign Seishi for no apparent reason. After all, *you* have treated me with unreserved kindness since the incident this morning, and she too has put herself out to help me. I remember quite clearly now too that it was her intervention that drove Miramu back into the forest. I do not think I would have held out much longer against him — certainly not long enough to strike any kind of blow. Therefore I owe you both my life… and as a Meihi, that's a debt I won't forget to repay."

"Your people are very serious about such things." Chichiri reflected. "It's repayment enough to see your condition improve. I know Myoume would say the same, too. We're all parts of a giant puzzle, and the Gods have been playing games with us — but finally the pattern is starting to pan out before us. Why *wouldn't* we help you? Clearly that's why you came — to ask for our help, after all. We're giving it unreservedly… as a Meihi, I would have thought you'd understand that better than most."

"True enough." Hyoushin inclined his head slightly. "I cannot argue on that point."

"Bakaru said you were strong… resolute about protecting your country and all of its people, regardless of the cost to yourself." Chichiri said softly. "And Aoi and Maichu have both said it too. It's true, isn't it? You're a fighter… no matter what you've encountered in

the past, you've always forged through it. Correct?"

"Yes, I believe so." Hyoushin agreed. "As I said before, life is there, whatever its nature. You have to find the will to live it, no matter what."

"So why so much hatred towards the herahisa?" Chichiri scolded. "It makes no sense… a man willing to fight and die for his Emperor's sake is afraid of a little bit of northern mountain weed?"

"I dislike herahisa and always have." Hyoushin pulled a face. "It is essentially a poison counteracting against another poison. Yes, it is effective, but it makes one nauseous and giddy while it works and I do not like the sensation."

"I would have thought that, in contrast to the poison, a little queasiness would be nothing." Chichiri said frankly, and Hyoushin offered him a wry, rueful smile.

"Perhaps." He acknowledged. "My mother said much the same thing the first time around. I seem to recall her telling me how hopeless I was, complaining about such a little thing when my life had been in such danger. But the smell and the taste of herahisa is vile… and a memory I would rather not relive too often."

"Well, Miyoki-sensei seemed to think two doses should be enough." Chichiri responded. "One now, and one later this evening… though he gave me enough for three, so it depends on how quickly your condition improves."

"I see." Hyoushin sighed. "All right. I can see that I will have to comply… although I cannot pretend to be happy about it."

"That's pretty ungrateful, you know." Myoume pushed open the door of the chamber at that moment, a glass of water in her hand as she eyed him reproachfully. "Here. That will take the taste away some, no doubt. But Chichiri went to a lot of trouble to help you — you could at least be grateful that he did."

Hyoushin started, staring at her in surprise, and Chichiri saw the prophet's cheeks pinken at the sudden scrutiny.

"You worried a lot of people." She said bluntly, setting the drink down firmly at the bedside. "It wouldn't hurt you to be a more compliant patient, even if you are feeling better now."

"I suppose that did sound somewhat ungrateful." Hyoushin admitted, offering Chichiri an apologetic look. "I am sorry. It was not meant to sound that way."

“It’s all right, you know.” Chichiri held up his hands, shaking his head as he did so. “I’d rather you argued about it, to be honest. As I said, it means you’re fighting back. Miyoki-sensei also gave me something with which to treat your arrow wound, too… I told him your left arm had been damaged by the poison, and he said that it might help, at least some. Whether or not you’ll recover the use of that arm fully, he didn’t know and nor do I. But he seemed to have treated a lot of people for gendoku-ja poison in the past. So I trusted that he knew what he was doing.”

He paused, his expression softening as he remembered the look on Lirayi’s face.

“Your sister is worried about you.” He added gently. “For her sake, don’t fight me too hard, all right? She was all for coming back with me to nurse you, but Bakaru put a stop to it — he didn’t want her to be getting in your way.”

“Rayi…” Hyoushin’s eyes clouded, then he nodded. “I’m glad that he put his foot down and didn’t let her come. I would rather she did not see me quite so incapacitated — and I would be constantly worrying about her, too, if she was here while we were in Kutou.”

“Your going to Kutou depends on how quickly you heal.” Chichiri told him frankly. “Even if you can communicate with Kintsusei-sama — even if you do want to do it with all your heart and soul. There are too many people who’d be upset if you died a needless death, after all.”

“People?” Hyoushin repeated. “Lirayi, perhaps. But…?”

“Aoiketsu. Maichu.” Chichiri counted them off on his fingers. “Bakaru. Kintsusei-sama himself, no doubt. And the people here too, Hyoushin. We’ve all got somewhat involved in the life-saving effort — even my young daughter keeps asking me how the Tenshi-san is doing, whenever I leave this room.”

“Tenshi… san?” Hyoushin stared, and Chichiri smiled sheepishly.

“She thinks you look like an angel, you know.” He admitted. “And though I’ve tried to explain to her about Meihi and whatever, she seems to find it easier to call you that than to remember your real name. But it’s thanks to her that there’s been such a plentiful supply of water… the poor girl’s been working flat out at the well, bless her, because she wants so much to help.”

“An angel, am I?” Hyoushin snorted. “I don’t think anyone has ever likened me to that before.”

“Meikyo sees the best in things, though.” Myoume sat down on the end of the bed. “She’s that way with everyone. And Chichiri’s right. She asked me too, when I went to get you that.”

“I see.” Hyoushin grasped the glass in his right arm, sipping the water gingerly. “Then I should thank her as well as you, should I not?”

“Perhaps, later.” Chichiri agreed. He reached out his fingers to brush Hyoushin’s brow, nodding approvingly.

“Whatever you say about the weed, you know, your fever has already come down.” He added. “Most remedies don’t act quite so swiftly… I’m impressed.”

“I told you. It’s a poison that counteracts another poison.” Hyoushin lowered his glass. “If you drank it under any other circumstances, it would likely kill you. Perhaps I *should* see Miyoki-sensei’s writings before you try and do anything with it, Chichiri — an exact translation will be necessary if you do not wish to cause unnecessary suffering to potential patients.”

“I have no intention of dabbling in something I don’t understand without proper guidance.” Chichiri assured him. “But I’d appreciate your help.”

“Well, I can translate.” Hyoushin took another sip of water, setting the glass aside as he reached across to brush his left hand with the index finger of his right. “So long as this arm remains like this, I cannot attempt to write… although I suspect my writing would horrify you in any case. My Chinese script is quite awful, even after all these years… there is no logic to the characters or their structure and no manner of simplification that I can see.”

“Meihi is a mixture of lines and curls.” Chichiri reflected. “Bakaru said that the people of Hokkan all once used that script… but I certainly can’t make head nor tails of it.”

“Yes, it was commonplace at one time.” Hyoushin agreed. “The Meihi kept it where the Hokkan-jin standardised their language in a most ungraceful manner. But the plaques that commemorate Genbu no Miko are written in the old script… it was almost nostalgic to read it.”

“Aoiketsu told me that you fight normally with that hand, also.” Chichiri pursed his lips. “That’s the case? It’s unusual if it is, you know.”

“I have never pretended to be a usual soldier.” Hyoushin said ironically. “Yes. I am left-handed. I always was, even as a child —

though the years inbetween probably strengthened that fact."

He stretched his right hand, and Chichiri could see the faint white criss-cross patterns etched into the man's chalk-fair skin.

"I believe the fingers on this hand have likely been broken many times in the past." He said simply. "It suffered badly by the whip in my time as a slave, since slavers assume that your right hand is your working hand and so endeavour to weaken you. Though it is well-healed after all this time, it has never been quite as strong as my left. When I began training, it seemed natural for me to bear the weapon in the other hand — and Kintsusei-sama had my blade fashioned especially for me because of it."

"It is an unusual weapon, true enough." Chichiri admitted, his gaze flitting to the sword that stood propped up against the door. "But Miramu's aim does seem to have been a deliberate attempt to weaken your ability to defend yourself. Your life is probably safe for now, Hyoushin — but I don't know what to do to heal that arm. Without use of it — you can't fight at all?"

"No better than a beginner." Hyoushin acknowledged, a faint note of bitterness in his tones. "I am afraid in that respect I am of little use to anyone, now."

"Right now your best use is your being alive." Myoume said softly. "That's our priority. You recovering and living. Anything else can wait."

Hyoushin sighed, rubbing his temples.

"It is hot in here." He murmured. "And the herahisa makes my head muggy. Would it be an imposition if I asked to get up?"

"Are you sure you're up to that?" Chichiri eyed him anxiously, and Hyoushin offered a wry smile.

"There is one way to find that out." He responded. "I would like to try. Outside must be cooler than in here, surely… and I can see tree branches from here outside the window. Surely there is some shade? Besides, you promised to let me speak to Seiryuu no Miko when I was better able… and I would like to do it as soon as possible."

"Woah there." Myoume put up her hands. "An hour ago you were fair gasping for breath, and I was afraid you wouldn't even last till Chichiri got back. Now you're demanding to go outside… and more, to ply Hikari with things *we've* not even discussed with her yet…?"

"We don't have time to waste." Hyoushin said gravely, and Chichiri

frowned, realising the truth in his words.

“Hyoushin’s right.” He said frankly. “We don’t have time to hang around and wait for him to convalesce properly. Some fresh air may well do him good — there’s a slight breeze coming off the mountains now, and in the shade of the plum trees he might well feel less suffocated.”

“And Hikari?” Myoume raised an eyebrow. “Should it really come from him, all this theorising we’ve been doing? The two of them have only spoken as rivals… do you really think it’s a good idea?”

“Hyoushin and Maichu came from the North to seek her help.” Chichiri got to his feet, holding out a hand to the Meihi, who gazed at him in surprise. “Of all people, Myoume, the call for help should come from Kutou’s people. She’s already promised Aoi, you know… she’s said she’ll help Kutou if she can. Yes, I think it’s right this way. I’m Suzaku’s, and you’re Byakko’s. But Hyoushin and Maichu are Kutou-jin. And Kutou should be the ones to ask Seiryuu no Miko to save their land, in the end. Otherwise it’d be wrong, wouldn’t it?”

Myoume sighed, a troubled look entering her indigo eyes as slowly she nodded her head.

“You’re right.” She acknowledged. “I just… he’s not that strong yet, you know. Maichu said he hadn’t eaten right since they left Hokkan, and…”

“I am still in the room, surprisingly.” Hyoushin murmured at that juncture. “And able to hear and participate in conversation, even if I am considered just a patient in this exercise. It is my wish to go outside, Myoume. And my wish to speak to the Miko. Therefore any risk should fall on my head. Culpability will not be yours, if it proves to be a foolish gesture.”

He grasped Chichiri’s hand firmly in his own right fist, pulling himself unsteadily to his feet. As he did so, he tried to put his left hand out to support himself, but the movement caused pain to jerk through his injured limb and he gasped, the arm falling heavily against his side as he stumbled.

“Careful!” Myoume was quick to support him, sending him a reproachful glance. “Here or not, your judgement is shot… either by fever or herahisa, whichever you prefer to blame. At least take it slowly, all right? We’ll get you outside — but stop trying to do too much! You’re still badly hurt, you know… a little bit of green slime isn’t going to magically fix everything Miramu did.”

“Green slime.” Hyoushin pursed his lips. “Yes, that is an adequate assessment.”

He took a deep breath, and Chichiri could tell he was steeling himself ready for the short trip from the sickroom to the world outside. As he glanced at his companion, he realised that Myoume’s concerns bore some weight — the Meihi’s fever had clearly taken its toll on a body already tried by the warm climate and the stress of being on the run.

“Well, I’ll mention it to Aidou.” He mused aloud, as he made sure Hyoushin was steady on his feet. “She won’t brook opposition from anyone, so that’ll be all right.”

“Aidou?” Hyoushin sent him a quizzical glance, and Chichiri nodded.

“My wife.” He said cheerfully. “She’s an excellent cook, and I’m sure she’ll prepare something for you to eat when it’s a little cooler outside.”

“I’m not hungry, you know. And if you make me drink more of that green solution, I’m likely to remain so, no matter how much food you give me.”

“Aidou doesn’t like waste.” Chichiri said mildly. “So I’m sure you won’t get much choice in the matter.”

“Aidou-san is a good cook.” Myoume’s expression cleared at this suggestion. “And Chichiri’s right… she won’t let you waste anything she’s made. You need to rebuild your strength in any case. If Maichu’s right about you not having eaten properly… how long have you been travelling?”

“Long enough.” Hyoushin said vaguely. “I’m not a weak man, Myoume. My body can handle a few days without food. When I was in bonds I would sometimes work dawn till dusk with nothing but scraps of bread as sustenance for the week long. I am in no danger of starvation.”

“A week…” Myoume’s eyes opened wide with dismay, and Hyoushin nodded.

“Such things happen.” He said frankly. “Are we going outside?”

“I can tell you’re used to being in a position of command.” Amusement flickered once more in Chichiri’s ruby gaze, but nevertheless he nodded, gesturing to Myoume to open the door as he helped the tribesman towards it. “Yes, we’re going.”

"*Hyoushin-sama*!" As they stepped out into the bright Kounan sunlight, there was an exclamation, and Aoiketsu hurried towards them, Maichu in hot pursuit as they registered the frail but determined form of their Commander. "Hyoushin-sama… you're… you're *up*!"

"Strangely, it seems I am." Hyoushin agreed. His gaze flitted from Aoiketsu to Maichu, then he offered a faint smile. "Thank you for your concern."

"*Concern*?" Maichu echoed. "That's a friggin' understatement… shit, sir, don't scare us like that!"

"Is he all right now? I mean, he'll live, right?" Aoiketsu glanced at Chichiri anxiously, and Chichiri shrugged.

"With a little luck and some help from his Meihi brethren, yes. I think so." He agreed cautiously. "But you two would be better off practicing your sword techniques in readiness for your trip home — not bothering Hyoushin when it's hot and he needs to rest. Miramu's poison has hopefully been caught, but even so your Commander's had a heavy enough day of it with one thing or another. Give him some space, okay?"

"Space?" Aoiketsu started. "But…"

"It's okay." Maichu grabbed his friend firmly by the arm. "Tasuki gave me my blade back, so I might as well get some use out of it. An' that *shinken* thing that Hikari lets you swing around is a damn fine blade, Aoi-kun — I want to see whether it's any easier to knock out of your hands in any case."

"Thank you." Chichiri grinned. "Have you seen Hikari, by the way? She's not left the farm?"

"She's helping Meikyo weed." Aoiketsu shook his head. "Shishi took Eiju to the mountain to practice swords with Kouji-san, so Hikari told Aidou-san she'd do his chores for him. Why?"

"It's time we spoke to her about… Kutou and Seiryuu." Myoume said quietly. "Do as Chichiri said, Aoi… you'll need all your wits about you when you go to Kutou, and you're still not one hundred percent confident with that sword yet. You have to trust in it more if you're going to be able to protect Hikari — I think she's going to need everything she can get in terms of help if she's going to raise Seiryuu and save your country."

At this, Aoiketsu's expression became grave and he nodded.

“I will.” He agreed. “I’ll be strong enough… I promise.”

“Then lets get moving, bonehead.” Maichu gave his arm a tug. “Come on.”

As the two young men headed back across the grass, Hyoushin watched them with a thoughtful look on his face.

“I was right, in the end, to let him come.” He murmured softly. “Even though sometimes he is foolhardy… I was right.”

“Maichu, you mean?” Chichiri asked, and Hyoushin nodded.

“I did not know what would greet us, here.” He admitted. “Myoume… your vision still troubles me. If I must believe — and now I think I must — that your gift is everything that I’ve heard it is, the words you spoke in the cave in Sairou are true ones. And though we now know the identity of the tribal traitor — I am more concerned about your words to Maichu. Do you remember them, even now?”

“Yes.” Myoume said soberly. “I can’t put your mind at rest, because I don’t know enough to do that.”

“And Kayu? Him too?”

“Hei Kayu…” Myoume’s eyes narrowed, and she sighed heavily, shaking her head.

“I can’t explain those things.” She said at length. “No matter how dearly you want me to, Hyoushin… it’s beyond me.”

“You can’t… or you won’t?”

“Both.” Myoume acknowledged. “Toroki speaks when she wants to speak. I don’t know the precise meaning of that prophesy. Potentially Maichu is in danger so long as he is in Kounan. What from, I don’t know. Something… that’s all that’s clear to me. I don’t want to speculate any further than that.”

She reddened uncomfortably, dropping her gaze.

“I already did that enough.” She admitted. “I assumed *you* were the tribesman, and look where that got us all.”

“Many others have also made that assumption.” Hyoushin said evenly. “Not just you.”

“But based on my prophesy.” Myoume said guiltily. “If I’d not spoken, you wouldn’t have been exiled like this. Or, probably, hurt.”

“But I would also not have come to Kounan.” Hyoushin pointed out. “And Kounan is where Sukunami Hikari is. So all things come full

circle in the end. If you were a catalyst for anything, Myoume, you were one to bring Kutou in touch with its Miko. That's all. You have guilt for nothing else."

"Well, you two certainly have become friendly in the short time I was away." Chichiri observed merrily, humour sparkling in his ruby eyes as he absorbed the sudden embarrassment that crossed Myoume's expression. "Perhaps Suzaku has a stronger influence on people here than I thought."

At that moment they reached the herb garden, and at the sight of them, Meikyo was on her feet, clutching her handful of weeds to her chest as she hurried towards them.

"Papa!" She exclaimed. "And… Tenshi-san, are you feeling better now?"

Hyoushin just stared at the girl, taken aback by this sudden, friendly greeting, and Chichiri laughed, reaching out to ruffle his fingers playfully through the small girl's unruly red hair.

"Mei-chan, you shouldn't be yelling… and if you get mud all over your clothes, your mother won't be pleased." He said softly. "Besides, you already know that our guest's name is Hyoushin-san. He's not an angel."

"I know." Meikyo looked sheepish, raising big ruby eyes to the Meihi's perplexed amethyst ones as she did so. "I'm sorry, Hy… Hyoushin-san. But you look so pretty like an angel, and so I just thought it fitted somehow. It's easier to remember."

"I…" Hyoushin was lost for words, and Chichiri's smile broadened.

"Hyoushin, this is my younger child — my daughter, Meikyo." He explained. "Meikyo, thank you for helping to bring in so much water. You've worked hard today and I'm proud of you."

Meikyo beamed at the praise, dropping the weeds down on the ground as she clasped her hands together behind her back.

"I wanted to help." She told him. "Because Papa had a patient, and everyone else had important things to do, too."

"Then I should thank you also." Hyoushin seemed to gather his wits at this, bowing his head slightly towards the exuberant youngster. "I am grateful for your assistance, Meikyo. It is very hot in your country, and the water has been most welcome."

"It's all right." Meikyo assured him. "Hikari-neechan and Shishi helped me, too. You're a friend of Aoi-nii's, aren't you?"

“In a manner of speaking, yes.” Hyoushin agreed. “I suppose I am.”

“Then you must know Hikari-neechan too, right?” Meikyo asked innocently. “Since she and Aoi-nii like each other, you must do. Hikari-neechan said you were like Aoi’s father because his real one got killed in the war with Kutou. So in that case, I guess you must be glad to have come here, where they are.”

“Meikyo, what are you talking about?” Chichiri could barely suppress his mirth now, shaking his head. “Poor Hyoushin’s head is still confused enough without you adding more to it. Hikari was with you — she’s not still? It’s her that he really needs to see.”

“I’m here, Chichiri.” Hikari emerged at that moment from the vicinity of the well, wiping her wet hands on her apron as she faltered, registering the presence of the wounded Meihi. “Oh. Hyoushin-san… I… didn’t realise…”

She faltered, trailing off awkwardly, and for a moment there was silence. Then Hyoushin offered her a faint smile.

“I realise I have no right to ask this.” He said quietly. “But I would be grateful if you would join me in the shade of the plum trees for a while. I have something of import of which to speak… and I have already wasted almost a whole day with my incapacitation.”

Hikari’s eyes widened at this, and another brief silence followed. Then she spread her hands, nodding her head.

“If… if it’s all right.” She said softly. “I mean… if you’re… up to… you know…”

She faltered, and Chichiri cast her a keen look.

“It’s all right, Hikari.” He said quietly. “I know what Hyoushin wants to talk to you about… and it’s something that you should hear from him, I think — not from anyone else. He’s not our enemy… you know that, I think, now?”

“Ye..es.” Hikari agreed hesitantly. “Yes. I… I know. After all, Miramu attacked him. And… and Aoi believes in him… so… so I will, too. It’s all right, Hyoushin-san. I… I’ll listen to what you want to say. Whatever… whatever it is.”

The shrine of Seiryuu was empty for once as Miramu dropped soundlessly down from the beams, glancing around him for any sign of the enigmatic Hin priest as he did so. Kikei was nowhere in evidence, however, and Miramu smiled, a glitter of satisfaction in his

indigo eyes.

“The cat’s away and the mouse is going to play.” He murmured to himself, stalking purposefully across the chamber to the furthest wall as he did so. “Kikei’s usually here, so I probably don’t have long — he must be with the Emperor, pandering to his latest tantrum. It’s almost amusing, the way that Kintsusei has suddenly become decisive and almost ruthless in his decision making, just on learning of the death of his favourite. If I had known it would make him such an interesting specimen, I would have killed Hyoushin long before this. It seems the Emperor does not know how to cope without his ghost-like shadow.”

He paused beneath the arcing gold stomach of the dragon god, glancing up at the gilted scales as he ran his fingers briefly against their surface. The metal was cold and hard to the touch, and he smirked, nodding his head in approval.

“A bleak, ice-cold metal statue, yet men bow to you and pray.” He reflected. “This deity business is as ridiculous in this land as it is in my own. And Seiryuu is just as greedy and unforgiving a master as Byakko in the West. To be the God’s man means to not be your own man — no wonder all of Seiryuu’s Seishi died or fled the shackles of their curse. I would do the same. In fact, perhaps I might say that I did. Even so, though… Kikei is willing to go up against this force on his own. To use the Miko, he said — to manipulate her enough to make her wish the power of Seiryuu into his hands, and then… what? Why does he not fear the spirits of the Seiryuu departed? Motley and disjointed a body they may have been — but even so… is he right to dismiss them so casually?”

As he leant against the statue, pondering this thought, he caught sight of a slight slit in the far wall of the chamber and his brows knitted as he remembered the secret recess where Kikei had been housing the blessed treasures and relics Hyoushin had gathered. Although he had often used it as an excuse for his convenient, swift entrances and exits, he had never felt inclined to delve into the depths before, but for some reason that morning was different.

It was a sacred treasure trove, he mused idly, amusement in his expression as he sauntered towards it, placing his hands against the wall as he gently slid the dividing screen back to reveal the stairwell beyond. Casting a glance behind him to ensure that Kikei had not returned to his base, he stepped inside, pulling the screen across behind him.

“I can conceal myself, after all.” He reflected. “But it would be hard to explain how a door managed to open by itself.”

The steps down were cold and dark, lit only by the faint glitter of glow-stones embedded into the soft-stone walls. Old carvings of the dragon appearing in the sky above Kutou had long since had their bright colours worn away by time or concealed by dust and spider-webs, and the once illustrious images now looked sorry and chipped, as if Kutou's spiritual self was as war-torn and ragged as its physical one. Once the chamber beneath had been used to host special, sacred blessings, but as time had gone on, it had become more and more neglected, and as Miramu descended deeper into the vaults beneath Seiryuu's most holy place, he reflected on how infrequently this place was disturbed.

"Yet Kikei has been here many times recently." He mused to himself. "To deposit and check on the treasures he's hoarded. I wonder if he can really manipulate that girl… if she is the Miko after all. With all these holy treasures — can he dictate the way in which Suzaku's own Shinzahou acts? Somehow I have my doubts — for a priest, his understanding of holy powers seems to be somewhat limited."

He smiled humourlessly.

"Oh well. I suppose we can't all be Shichi Seishi."

As he reached the foot of the winding stairway, he found a big wooden door greeted him, dark planks of old oak or cedar varnished with something thick and almost black to keep out the marauding insects and the wear of time. Set into this broad panel was a tarnished gold handle, moulded into the shape of a dragon, with its curling tail hooked around to make a handle. Despite his natural scepticism, Miramu had to acknowledge a faint kind of beauty and grace to the handiwork, and as he slipped his hand around it, he had the impression that it had been crafted by someone who had held his faith dear.

"Someone who cared enough to put heart and soul into his rendition." He muttered. "Dammit… someone as crazy as Myoume."

The thought of his sister sobered him somewhat, as he remembered once more her expression in the grove in Kounan.

"She seemed truly cross with me, then." He acknowledged. "And I am fool enough to let it prey on my senses. I should know better by now."

He gripped the handle more tightly, expecting to find it locked, but to his surprise it swung back, letting out a faint creak and groan as the ancient hinges protested at the sudden movement. Stepping forward

into the vault itself, he was immediately struck by the glitter of Shinzahou in the darkness, and something about the faintly ethereal light made him pause.

“The power of three Gods confined in one place.” He reasoned. “Byakko. Genbu. Seiryuu. Yet they’re mere trinkets at best. Unless you can unlock that magic… Kikei, there must be more to this than what you’ve told me. I don’t understand… with holy power comes holy guardians, and not all of them are as unwilling to cross paths with their destiny as I am.”

“What are *you* doing down here?”

A voice startled him and he swung around, meeting the indignant azure gaze of Seiryuu’s mage spirit as he did so. “This is not a place for dirty Byakko rubbish. Get out. I don’t need your company.”

“Suiko.” Miramu gathered his wits, staring at her in surprise. “So this is your playpen, is it? You’re locked away down here — an all powerful mage trapped beneath the ground?”

“I’m not trapped.” Suiko shook her head impatiently, wisps of ghostly blue hair flying out around her face as she did so. “I *choose* to be here, to protect Seiryuu’s treasures from harm. That’s my job. I’m Seiryuu’s mage. You wouldn’t understand that. You’re Byakko’s… and even *he* didn’t want you.”

“I think you’ll find that I chose not to follow his guidance, not the other way around.” Miramu said frankly, and Suiko snorted.

“So you say.” She said derisively. “But if you had any *real* strength, you would have answered his call. Even your mad sister has more wits about her — even if she is a dirty tiger’s witch slave, she at least had the courage to become that. Not like *you*.”

“Shut up.” Miramu said evenly. “I don’t need to take insults from someone who isn’t really alive. You have no idea what you’re talking about, as usual — and you’re much more pleasant company when you’re not speaking.”

“Then go away.” Suiko pulled a face at him. “I told you. I don’t want you here.”

“You’re down here alone?” Miramu made no attempt to leave, and Suiko nodded her head, gesturing to the chamber around her.

“Do you see anyone else?” She demanded, and Miramu grimaced at her.

“Kitora’s not around, then?”

“I don’t care where Kitora is.” Suiko snapped. “She’s tainted because you’re tainted. I hate both of you, and I don’t care what you do.”

“Seiryuu must be cringing up there in the heavens, when he reflects that the best he could do in terms of a protective mage was you.” Miramu retorted cruelly. “A sulky, petulant princess — that’s all you amount to in the end. No wonder Kutou’s in such peril, if you’re the best he has to offer.”

“You think you’re so smart.” Suiko spat back, and for a moment a glimmer of blue light flickered around the edges of her body, making her appear more like the mage she was and less like the sullen adolescent she was prone to becoming. “You’re the one who’s truly ignorant. You run around doing errands for that nasty, dirty Hin Priest, yet you don’t even understand why you do them. You’re as disgusting as he is, Byakko no Amefuri. You smell of cat-magic — cat magic and blood.”

“Oh, I see.” Miramu’s lip curled derisively. “And you, I suppose, are an expert on Kikei’s plans and schemes? An empty headed spirit conjured from an ancient lizard scale holds all the secrets to the universe, does she?”

“Don’t mock what you don’t understand.” Suiko’s eyes hardened, and for a moment Miramu thought she might attack him, as the flicker of blue magic strengthened and danced between her fingers. “You humans are fools. *All* of you are fools. You don’t listen and you seek to manipulate and dominate… you don’t know what you’re doing, and you seek to mock me? I have existed since before your lifetime, and before the lifetime of even your predecessors, Byakko no Amefuri. I know much more than you. And I know what that Priest intends to do… if you are fool enough to continue helping him.”

Despite himself Miramu took a step back, realising as he did so that the mage’s aura was stronger near to the Shinzahou and that he had been foolish to antagonise her temper. She was, he knew, flighty and unpredictable enough to attack him and, despite his bravado, he realised that a Seishi was likely no match for a God’s own chosen spirit. He held up his hands, offering her a rueful smile.

“I should know better than to insult a lady of Seiryuu, even one born from dust and dragon relics.” He murmured. “Very well. If you are so wise, Suiko-sama, tell me what it is you think I don’t know.”

Suiko’s eyes narrowed to mere slits, sparks of azure fire darting from them as she eyed him suspiciously. Then she shrugged, spreading

her hands as the flares of blue light disappeared.

“I suppose I could.” She said silkily, her temper suddenly dissipating as quickly as it had come. “Since it doesn’t matter either way where you’re concerned, whether he succeeds or not.”

“Doesn’t it?” Miramu leant back against the wall, folding his arms across his chest. “I see. And why not?”

“Because you’ll be dead, I suppose.” Suiko said flippantly, and Miramu’s eyes narrowed.

“That’s not a subject to joke about.” He said sharply. “What do you mean by that, Suiko?”

“What I said.” The coldness was back in the mage’s eye now, as she regarded him rather like a hunter gazing on her prey. “Kikei is going to eradicate this world of all the Celestial Warriors, one by one. He plans to manipulate Seiryuu no Miko’s power to do that… and then try to absorb the remaining beast magic for himself. He is a fool, but this is his plan. And you are doomed, so long as you continue to help him. Ironic, isn’t it? You will die because you helped a dirty treacherous priest.”

Miramu stared at her for a moment, unable to conceal his dismay, and Suiko let out a peal of cold, amused laughter.

“So you *do* value your life then, Shadow of the West?” She taunted. Miramu frowned, shaking his head.

“I don’t care about it either way.” He said flatly. “Life is not something I asked for. Death is something I’ve often sought. Either way I don’t care if I survive or if I don’t. It’s not of interest to me.”

“Liar.” Suiko snorted. “You can say that, but I saw it in your eyes. You were afraid for a moment there… and you believed me enough to show me that fear. You do care, Miramu. You care a lot.”

“Perhaps not about the things you think I do.” Miramu snapped back. “Don’t presume to read my mind, because you can’t possibly know what I’m thinking.”

“I’m telling the truth.” Suiko folded her arms across her chest, tossing her head as if offended by his sharpness. “That is what Kikei wants to do. I know, because every time his fingers touch the sacred water of this shrine I hear it echoing around me like some ghost trapped in the walls of this place. I don’t like it — I don’t like what’s in his head, and I don’t like him. He’s a fool, like all humans are. And people will die because of it. Noone listens to me. Noone cares that I

know more about Seiryuu than anyone."

"You can cry on someone else's shoulder about that, Suiko. I just want the facts, not your ego." Miramu said bluntly.

Suiko merely poked out her tongue, and Miramu sighed.

"Seiryuu no Miko isn't here, anyway." He added. "So I don't know what you're fussing about."

"When the four Shinzahou are in Kutou, she will be." Suiko said stubbornly. "I'm not wrong. You'll see."

"Then it *is* that girl after all?" Miramu raised an eyebrow. "Hyoushin was right — Sukunami Hikari *is* Seiryuu's prodigal priestess?"

Suiko folded her arms, an obstinate expression touching her features, and Miramu sighed.

"I'm not going to kill the brat." He said flatly. "It's a curiosity — nothing more. If Kikei needs her so badly, why do you think I would hurt her?"

"*He* will try to. I don't trust you and I don't trust him."

"Well, I don't trust him either." Miramu responded. "The only one I trust is myself, Suiko. And then not all of the time."

He pursed his lips, running his fingers through his dark hair as he considered her words.

"Your reticence confirms it enough." He added. "But you have my word I won't go killing her. She's in Kounan — where my sister is. I won't go there, so you can stop behaving like a spoiled baby over it. Your precious Miko might well be in trouble if Kayu and his soldiers get her — but she's not at risk from me. At least, not at the moment."

"Hyoushin will find her first." Suiko's eyes glittered contemptuously. "I made the boy understand — you'll see, he'll get to her before that silly Kayu does."

"That will be hard for him." Miramu said bluntly. "Since he's already dead."

"Dead?" For the first time real horror flickered in the mage's blue eyes, and Miramu smirked, nodding his head.

"I took care of that little problem a few days ago." He agreed casually. "So you'll have to put your hope in some other guileless fool, Suiko. The Meihi is no longer a part of the puzzle."

He tut-tutted, shaking his head reprovingly.

“You shouldn’t trust a man who has no soul to do a God’s bidding.” He added. “I suppose you’re the missing piece of the puzzle — the one who sent Maichu after him and guided them to the South was *you* after all, wasn’t it? But you sent him to death, Suiko-chan. Sorry about that.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“One thing an assassin doesn’t lie about is the people he kills.” Miramu said quietly. “Especially when he does it for money.”

Suiko was silent for a moment, as if considering this. Then her eyes glittered with cold, icy fire.

“You had best hope you are wrong.” She said softly, an edge of danger to her words. “I am sent here to protect this land, Byakko no Amefuri. And protect it I will, no matter how many of its people you seek to hurt. If Hyoushin is killed… if the mission to retrieve the Miko fails… everything here will be destroyed. My land, your land… everything. But before it is, I will ensure that you understand what it means to cross Seiryuu’s magic. My master will not be bested by a tiger’s reject. Remember it.”

“You’re almost scary when you speak like that, you know.” Miramu told her flippantly. “But as I told you, I don’t care too much about my own fate. So in the end, your threats don’t have much effect, do they?”

He shrugged.

“Besides, my fate is already written.” He added lightly. “You may be Seiryuu’s mage, but you can’t change it. Whatever happens to this world… is it really anything to do with me? So what if it all ends — do you think there’s so much in this world that’s worth preserving?”

Suiko reached out a ghostly hand, brushing it against his cheek and Miramu started, feeling a prickle of strange energy run through him at her touch.

“It doesn’t matter what I think.” She said coolly. “It’s what *you* think. You’re a liar, Miramu. I can feel it from the water that runs through your body. You pretend not to care, but like all stupid humans, you do care. In the end, what do you care about more — that’s the question?”

“It’s also none of your business.” Miramu swiped her hand away, glaring at her in annoyance. “I’ve moved too far along this path to

change it now, so don't think you can appeal to my conscience. It died a long time ago, when I slit my father's throat. Do you understand how many people I've killed since then, Suiko? I've felt nothing for any of them. Nothing at all. My heart is not something you can appeal to… it's gone, if it was ever really there at all."

Suiko eyed him for a moment, and Miramu had the faint impression of the predator in her gaze. Her mouth twitched into a derisive smile and she stood back, nodding her head.

"Lie to yourself too if you like, Byakko no Amefuri." She said sweetly. "In the end, it doesn't matter what you say… does it? You and I both know that you're a disgusting piece of tiger refuse, after all. But now I know something else about you, too. My magic never lies… you try to kill it, but it still lives inside of you. Your heart."

"Then you really are deluded, if you believe that." Miramu held up his hands. "These fingers have spilled blood many times without remorse. Or does Seiryuu not consider that evil?"

"To be evil, Miramu, you need to be strong." Suiko told him disparagingly. "You are not evil. You are not strong enough to be either good*or* evil, and you know it better than I do. You hate yourself more than I hate you, which is pitiful… no wonder you act in the shadows like a coward. You may have killed Hyoushin, but even now you envy his strength nonetheless. All these things flow through you… I can feel them, even though you deny them."

"Shut up, you stupid witch." Despite himself, Miramu was discomfitted. "You're as bad as Myoume, digging into things that are none of your business!"

"Ah yes. Myoume. Toroki. The mad tiger slave." Suiko's expression became thoughtful, and Miramu's indigo eyes darkened.

"What about her? She's nothing to do with you."

"No, nothing at all." Suiko agreed casually. She eyed him for a moment, then shrugged, gesturing to the door with a sweep of her hand.

"Leave. I'm bored with you now, and you're making the air smell funny."

"Believe me, I've had enough of you and your whining company, too." Miramu snapped. "You needn't worry about me coming here again. But you can't stop Kikei now. Hyoushin may have been your plaything or your puppet, but I'm not someone you can manipulate with your water witchcraft. I care nothing for Kutou, or for its people.

Remember that. I'm an assassin who works for coin — and that's all."

"That's all." Suiko echoed, and there was something in her azure eyes that Miramu did not like. "If you say so, Byakko no Amefuri."

"*Stop* calling me that!" Miramu exclaimed.

"Why? Because you're afraid of what Kikei might do if he knew you were really one of *them*?" Suiko taunted, and Miramu's brows knitted together in anger.

"Because it's not who I am." He shot back. "And it never will be. Understand that, you stupid hag — Amefuri is something I *never* will be!"

With that he focused his mind on suppressing his energy, shifting his form from the darkness of the crypt-like chamber to the palace grounds. Once there, he sank down against the wall, letting out his breath in a rush as he tried to get a grip on his temper. And yet it was not just anger that swirled within him, but fear too, as he contemplated Suiko's revelations.

"Is she right about Kikei?" He wondered softly. "And if she is… what do I care about it? If this world dies… but…"

He frowned, reaching down to pluck a wild flower from the grass that grew nearby.

"Whatever I do, I suppose I have to do it soon." He reflected. "It's no business of mine how Kutou suffers, or whether or not its people die. This whole world is full of corruption and pain, and I don't care if Kikei seeks to destroy Amefuri's spirit along with it. I have tried so many times to die without success… maybe that Priest will be able to break the curse my sister's prophesy put on me ten years ago. And yet… and yet…"

He frowned, tossing the flower to the ground in a sudden fit of frustration.

"Damn her." He muttered. "*Damn* that witch! I should know better than to dabble with her or her kind. Monsters drawn from ancient treasures… I should have known that involving my blood and my talents in this would end badly. And now… with Kikei closing in on Seiryuu no Miko… what else is there left for me to do? He will get what he wants, if Kayu is as diligent as he always appears. And then I will have to decide… whether to kill her, or him, or both…"

He grimaced.

"Or to stand back and do nothing, while he destroys everything in

this world."

It was not far to walk between the Ri farmhouse and the sheltered shade of the family's plum and cherry trees, and as Hyoushin settled himself as comfortably as he was able, he realised that despite his complaints, the heavy cloud of fever and pain that had increasingly hampered his breathing had begun to wane. Even the faint dizziness of the herahisa at work was preferable in comparison, and ruefully he scolded himself for his childish protestations.

"It just reminded me so much of when I was a boy, and how much my mother chided me for my cowardice then." He reflected, sitting back against the hard trunk of the tree as he let out his breath in a rush. "As Chichiri says, I am a soldier willing to die for my country. It's been a long time since I let my childhood opinions dictate my adult actions — so strange that it should come back to me now, when I am as far from Kutou as I could possibly be. Perhaps it is Myoume's dabbling in my memories — else why should such a thought be so prevalent in my mind almost thirty years on? If not for her interventions — would I even have remembered being bitten by a snake at all?"

He glanced at his young companion, watching as she seated herself across from him, spreading her skirts absently across the grass as she sent him a doubtful look. Despite her words there was hesitation in her hazel eyes, and Hyoushin frowned, taking in the young girl's appearance properly for the first time.

She *was* young, he realised — younger than Aoiketsu or Maichu, and dressed in the attire of a village girl, it seemed hard to believe that she had truly come to Kounan from a different world. For a moment he doubted his conviction, then he frowned, remembering his conversation with Chichiri.

"He believed it too. And confirmed her place of origin." He reminded himself. "Appearances can conceal things, after all — however she appears, I must have faith that this child is the one I am looking for."

As the silence began to grow oppressive, Hikari twisted her fingers together in her lap, letting out a heavy sigh as she did so.

"I guess this is awkward, huh." She murmured. "Since the last time we spoke… it wasn't really like this."

"The last time we spoke, you told me in no uncertain terms that you would never let me near Suzaku's Shinzahou." Hyoushin said

softly. “You had no doubt in your conviction then that I was your enemy… no doubt it is difficult for you to entertain the possibility I am not.”

“Aoi trusts you.” Hikari admitted, spreading her hands out before her as she continued to avoid his gaze. “But I… you… I don’t really know how to… talk to you. Or why you need to speak to me so suddenly. Chichiri seemed to think it was all right, so I agreed, but… even though you’re Aoi’s ally, Aoi’s from Kutou. And me… I…”

“You’re not.” Hyoushin finished the sentence for her, and Hikari shook her head.

“I’m not.” She echoed. “I suppose I am… confused by it, that’s all. I mean, when you apologised for Jin I thought maybe you weren’t a bad person after all — that Myoume had been wrong and that you weren’t the one we were really fighting. But you were still in our way, so…”

“So I took the Shinzahou and it is now in Kutou’s hands.” Hyoushin agreed. He pursed his lips, considering this for a moment. Then he sighed, shaking his head.

“Well, so be it.” He added. “There is nothing to be done about it now, after all.”

“You went to all that trouble to get it, and now you don’t care about it?” Hikari eyed him cautiously. “Why not? Why did you persuade Bakaru-san to give it to you if you don’t mind the fact it’s in their hands now? Do you *really* want to help us? Or… what *do* you want, Hyoushin-san? I don’t understand. You came here… you and Maichu… and now you want to talk to me — alone?”

“I came here — *we* came here — to find you.” Hyoushin said simply, eying her keenly as the young girl’s expression became discomfited. “Yes, I think you understand better than you want to admit why that might be. You see, when I was in Hokkan — when I retrieved the Shinzahou from Bakaru — I also learnt something else. From your own words, I discovered that you claim an acquaintance with Hongou Yui-sama… Seiryuu’s one time Priestess.”

“Yui-san?” Shock flickered in Hikari’s eyes. “But… what has that to do with anything? I told you then, she’s not going to come back and be a Priestess for you, even if I could somehow contact her — and I can’t, so if that’s your idea…”

“That’s not my idea.” Hyoushin held up his good arm, stopping her protestations in mid-flow. “Hongou Yui failed in Kutou once already, and I am not such a devotee of Seiryuu to trust in her trying a second

time. No. That is not my purpose. But you do not deny to me that you have met her? That you and she claim an acquaintance after all?"

"Yes." Hikari agreed slowly. "She and my mother are best friends and have been for a long time. But I still don't see…"

"How old are you, Hikari-san?"

"Fifteen." Hikari frowned. "Why?"

"Hongou Yui last came to Kutou eighteen years ago." A flicker of hope flared in Hyoushin's heart as he regarded her. "So it is true… beyond all doubt. You are indeed from her world — from the Miko's world."

"*That's* what you wanted to know?" Hikari stared at him, dismay in her hazel eyes. "Do you always sneak around when trying to find things out from people? You could have asked me straight, you know — tricking people isn't nice!"

"I apologise." Hyoushin bowed his head slightly in acknowledgement of her words. "You are right, of course — I have spent too long at Kutou's court, where such methods are a survival technique as much as anything else. Yet had I asked you directly — would you have been willing to answer me in kind?"

"Maybe." Hikari said cautiously. "Depending why you wanted to know."

Hyoushin was silent for a moment, contemplating. Then he nodded.

"All right." He said at length. "I will continue in your way, not my own. You are Suzaku no Shinzahou, are you not? Suzaku's power was sealed inside of you after his last summoning — and that is why you are in Kounan at this present time. This is why you could be so sure of whether or not I would locate it — you are obviously the only one who has any power over the treasure of Suzaku, and that is why you are so precious to the South."

A look of horror flooded Hikari's features, and Hyoushin knew that Aoiketsu had spoken the truth. He offered her a faint smile.

"You do not like my directness after all." He murmured. "I cannot win, can I, in my mode of approach?"

Hikari eyed him for a moment. Then she sighed, shaking her head.

"Aoi told you that, didn't he?" She asked resignedly. "He said he wouldn't, but I suppose… it was him who did."

"By accident, yes, he disclosed it to me." Hyoushin agreed. "But

Chichiri has also confirmed it, Hikari-san."

"*Chichiri*… did?" Hikari's eyes widened. "He trusts you that much already, even though you've just come here… even though…"

She trailed off, and Hyoushin could see that she was fighting something out with herself internally. He pursed his lips, gathering his strength as he struggled onto his knees, carefully bowing his head towards her in a gesture of submission. She faltered, staring at him in confusion as he raised his gaze to hers, maintaining his position as he tried to ignore the twinging, stabbing pain that darted through his left arm and across his side.

"Sukunami Hikari, I have come from Kutou to find you." He said softly. "As Suzaku no Shinzahou… no. You asked why it was I did not care about Hokkan's Shinzahou — the reason is simple. Suiko, Seiryuu's mage predicted that the uniting of the four Shinzahou would mean the coming of the Miko who would protect our land from its own destruction. And now I understand that prediction. By fair means or foul, three treasures are now in Kutou. You are the last one… the final piece in that puzzle. The truth is that Maichu and I came to Kounan to find Seiryuu no Miko. Hikari-sama… that Miko is you."

"*What?*" Abject shock flared in Hikari's hazel eyes and she shook her head, holding up her hands in protest.

"Wait a minute, back up! I'm Suzaku's — you said so, so you must know what that means! How can I be Seiryuu no Miko… when I'm in Kounan! What…"

"Aoiketsu is the son of Seiryuu's greatest and most powerful Seishi, Nakago." Hyoushin said gravely. "A man killed in the war between your land and our own. He is your guardian now, is he not? His father's blood drives him to protect Kutou's Priestess from harm."

"But I…"

"You are from the Miko's world." Hyoushin continued. "There is no mistake. You have been sent to Kounan, true enough… for what reasons only the Gods know themselves. And you do possess Suzaku's divine power, sealed within your body. But you *are* Seiryuu no Miko. The only one who can wish for peace in the East… is you."

Hikari fell silent at this, biting her lip as she struggled to absorb his words. Hyoushin did not take his gaze off her, watching the mixture of expressions that flickered through her hazel eyes. She opened her mouth to speak, then she hesitated, shaking her head.

"It's hurting you." She said softly. "Bowing like that, when there's

no need. You don't have to beg me for anything, Hyoushin-san… it makes me feel funny, if you do."

"Considering our past encounters, I wished to confirm to you my honesty in this matter." Hyoushin admitted. "But yes… it is not comfortable with my arm in this condition."

"Then sit back against the tree… if you want, I can fetch you something to drink." Hikari offered, reaching out a hand to help him, and as she did so, Hyoushin offered her a smile.

"Suspicious of me though you are, you still show me kindness." He said quietly. "Thank you, Hikari-san. Aoiketsu believes in you — well, if Chichiri's young girl spoke correctly, he is more attached to you even than I realised."

"I… suppose that's true." A faint colour rose in the girl's cheeks at this. "It sort of… happened that way, but… I don't think it's a bad thing. I mean… Myoume says we need to work together, after all. That he's here to protect me."

"Yes, perhaps." Hyoushin acknowledged. He sighed, eying her with a slight shake of his head. "Though it's almost a shame, really, but even so…"

"A shame?" Hikari looked startled. "Why is it a shame, if Aoi and I are close? Isn't that the right thing — I mean, if you… if I am Seiryuu no Miko… *shouldn't* we be close?"

"That was not my meaning." Hyoushin shook his head, wincing as she helped him back into a more easy position. "There. That is better… thank you. No, I was not thinking of you both as Miko and Guardian when I made that observation."

"What, then?" Hikari was confused. "I don't understand — why should it be bad? If he's happy, and I am… Is it because he bailed on his duty as a spy? Because if it is…"

"Aoiketsu was right to come here, and, it seems, right to follow his instincts and trust in you people." Hyoushin shook his head. "It is the rest of Kutou who are mistaken, not that boy. No. You misunderstand my thought processes completely."

"Then explain them to me, please." Hikari settled herself back on the grass. "Because I'm finding it hard to reason out myself… it seems sort of stupid to say something like that and I… I like Aoi a lot, so it upsets me, if you think it's a bad thing. Aoi has a lot of faith in you, and I… don't want that to be a problem. I can't change the way I feel, after all. And nor… nor can he. So if you really want my help, I need

you to understand that."

"I think perhaps I do understand — a little more than you think I do." Hyoushin said frankly. "It is just the fact that Aoiketsu has always been schooled to put Kutou first. He is the best young soldier I have ever trained, and he has had an education worthy of a Prince… all for this end, because it was his mother's dying wish. But he has never formed bonds with people outside of the Imperial Guard. Till now they have been his family and his friends together. He's never really seen the world until now, and that he has found someone for whom he can care…"

He sighed, shaking his head.

"But it is ill-fated, to love a Miko." He said matter-of-factly. "You do not belong here. You will go home. And so I think it is a shame… that of all women, it is*you* he has chosen to love. He is a boy with much promise in many fields… and undoubtedly he has a good heart. Yet he has always shied from women, and love is not something he has ever given freely. It will hurt him, I think, when you part. And this is what concerns me most of all."

Hikari's eyes widened at this, and Hyoushin saw a flicker of realisation dawn in her gaze.

"You really *are* like his father, aren't you?" She murmured. "Even if you are his Commander, and even if you have trained him to fight… he's still more important to you than just another soldier… isn't he?"

"*All* my men are important to me, Hikari-san." Hyoushin said simply. "They are people — with lives to keep or lose depending on the skills I teach them and the efficacy with which they learn. But perhaps you are correct… Aoiketsu*is* a little different from his fellows in that regard. His mother asked me to raise him and I gave her my word… Nakago's son, for the sake of Kutou's peace. But even if he had not been… I do not imagine things would have been done differently. He is one for whom I have made many choices and decisions as he has grown. It is yet my hope that they will prove to be the right ones in the end."

Hikari's eyes softened, and slowly she nodded her head.

"I think they were." She said thoughtfully. "When we first found out who Aoi was, Shishi challenged him to fight, but he refused… he said he wouldn't fight people who he didn't need to fight. I know now that Aoi's a better fighter than Shishi — he could have killed her, if he'd wanted… or probably any of us. But he didn't. He… he's not like that. And he's always said that it was because of the way you taught

him. That the reason Kutou's army no longer raided and pillaged was because you made sure they *didn't* do it… and he'd taken those things to heart."

"You perhaps give me too much credit." Hyoushin glanced up at the sky, digesting this carefully. "I have an element of self-interest too, Hikari-san. My people were killed by the raiding Kutou army, after all… and my siblings and I taken as slaves. There is no way I could inflict that type of warfare on someone else… I know too well what it is like, after all."

"Aoi said you didn't talk about your past at all." Hikari looked surprised, and Hyoushin nodded.

"I do not." He agreed. "And I shall no further, if it is all right with you."

He rubbed his left arm absently, eying her quizzically as he did so.

"You have not answered my request." He murmured. "To accept your role as Seiryuu no Miko and to raise the Dragon to protect Kutou. I am not Seiryuu's devotee — I am a Meihi, and I have never followed the cults of the four gods. But I have come to believe that it is possible to save Kutou by this method. I have seen other countries at peace… I have seen the potential for it in my own land. Though it will also rely on the will of the people — Hikari-sama, I am quite certain that the first move must be made by you."

Hikari was silent for a moment, and Hyoushin could tell she was thinking this over carefully. Then, eventually, she nodded her head.

"I'll try." She said honestly. "I was prepared to raise Suzaku in any case, but Taiitsukun kept saying I couldn't, and I didn't know why. Maybe this is the reason — I'm here for Kutou, not Kounan. It's messed up, but if Chichiri also thinks its true, then I guess I'll believe it. And I'll try. I promised Aoi to save his land if I could, and I told you before that I can keep my promises too."

A flicker of resolution burned in her hazel eyes, and at the sight of it, Hyoushin smiled.

"Thank you, Miko-sama." He said sincerely, holding his right hand out clumsily to clasp her fingers in his. He squeezed them for a moment, then released them, nodding his head.

"It is well, then, my coming here." He murmured, more than half to himself. "Despite the danger and the inconvenience I have caused… if I can return to my homeland with Seiryuu no Miko, I trust all will be well."

“In which case, there’s something else we should begin to look into, you know.”

At that moment Chichiri materialised beside the tree, making both jump as they gazed at him in surprise and confusion. He offered them a grin, tipping his *kasa* in their direction playfully as he did so.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to startle anyone.”

“Were you listening?” Hikari asked, and Chichiri nodded.

“Some.” He admitted. “But I wanted you to decide for yourself what to do, Hikari-chan. The request has to come from Kutou, you know — for the Miko’s help. Not from us. Now you’ve accepted it, there’s a lot we have to do — not least strengthen your own magic.”

He folded his arms, regarding them thoughtfully.

“And perhaps it’s time that we unearthed the relic of Hisei, too.” He reflected. “I’ll speak to Tasuki — I think that’s our next port of call. Somehow the spirit of that feather *must* be able to help us, considering Doryoku’s power within Shishi, and the bits and pieces I’ve heard about the other mage spirits. Perhaps she’ll have some advice — or provide us with support. Either way, I think that’s what we should do next. Wake Hisei, and ask her advice on how to save Kutou.”

Chapter 17

Chapter Sixteen

At long last they had reached Souun.

Kayu glanced out of the window of the inn at the busy streets below, a faint feeling of misgiving stirring in his heart as he remembered the last time he had visited the bandit's mountain town. That time, he, Aoiketsu and Maichu had all been working towards the same end, but this time he was operating as a lone agent and he knew that he didn't like it. The men with him were strong and keen, but even a few years less experience had made them green, and despite himself Kayu found himself wishing he could go back to before all of this.

Back to the time when Hyoushin had been their Commander.

At this thought he caught himself, berating his treacherous thoughts as he rested his hands on the windowsill of the chamber. That was the past, after all. Hyoushin was dead, a traitor to his land, and he had been charged with the job of finding and convincing his two young friends to come back home.

That at the very least was something positive, he admitted to himself ruefully, turning from the window to glance at his reflection in the small, smoky mirror. Without Hyoushin's malignant influence, he felt certain that his ties of friendship would be able to reach the two wayward strays. At least, he mused, as he pulled his thick dark hair back into its regulation tail, he certainly hoped so. As yet he knew the Emperor had looked upon them both with mercy — Maichu for his lack of insight and Aoiketsu because so far no messenger had managed to carry the news of Hyoushin's deposition so far into the enemy territory. But even so, Kayu realised that Kintsusei's patience would not hold out forever.

"So if I don't bring them back to report, confess or beg for his forgiveness myself, it may be too late to ever reach either of them." He decided, reaching for his sword as he strapped the belt firmly to his waist. "So it's up to me. Aoi and I may have had our fights in the past, but that was a long time ago. And Maichu — Maichu and I have always been friends. He's a straight-forward person — I know he'll listen to an old ally over potential snakes in the grass."

He pushed open the door of his chamber, heading briskly along the hallway and down the stairs to the main solar where he found his small group of excited companions already awaiting him. At his entrance, they got to their feet as one man, and Kayu felt suddenly self-conscious, realising that already they viewed him as their leader in this foreign land.

“And I must live up to that.” He muttered. “Seiryuu help me, somehow I must.”

“Kayu-dono, are we going to the mountain today?” As he took his seat, one of the youngest of the group piped up, eagerness in his dark eyes as he surveyed his captain hopefully. “To Reikaku-zan?”

“Yes and no.” Kayu agreed cautiously. “Listen, and keep your voice to a minimum, all right? This area — all of this area — is bandit territory. The people here turn a blind eye to their actions — in return, the rogues give them some form of protection. This is the way it’s always been — even the Emperor of Kounan doesn’t interfere in Reikaku-zan’s business. We need to tread carefully and not draw attention to ourselves.”

“Sorry.” The boy looked abashed. “I didn’t realise… I mean… *all* of it? Run by bandits? With the Emperor’s permission?”

“It seems that Reizeitei-sama’s father and the leader of the Sanzoku were comrades in arms in the last war against Kutou.” Kayu agreed briefly. “Since then there’s been some kind of agreement in place. Reikaku-zan is Suzaku’s mountain, after all.”

“But we’re really going there?” One of the other men asked quietly. “Even though it’s so important a place?”

“The relic of Suzaku is inside that mountain, and Kintsusei-sama has commanded us to retrieve it.” Kayu agreed. “Also the girl, Sukunami Hikari. I imagine that she will be the harder of the two things to locate, however. She seems to have generated a lot of interest among Kounan’s surviving Suzaku veterans… so this is what I suggest.”

He paused, remembering the night in Seisen and the conversation he had had with Kouran and her husband over the evening meal about the sorcerer Ri Hou Jun.

“I know where she’ll likely be.” He continued carefully. “And I also know that she’s in the protection of someone who’s pretty powerful. Since I’ve met the girl before, it seems a good idea for me to carry out that part of the task myself. I’ll go to the village and track her down.

In the meantime, you should all head to the mountain in search of the relic."

"You intend on going to the village… alone?" One of the soldiers whispered, and Kayu nodded.

"Yes." He said simply. "It's all right — it's not quite as it sounds. There is someone in the nearby vicinity who I think may be able to help me. And when we stopped in Seisen, I learnt a lot from that family about the sorcerer Chichiri and what exactly his powers are. It seems that he's not someone who likes to kill or who even looks for battle. This being the case, it seems pointless to waste multiple men on an errand that will be much easier alone. I can handle one teenage girl, after all."

He smiled, realising that once again his words were beginning to echo his missing Commander's.

"I'll come to the mountain once I have the girl." He added. "I'll be relying on you all to use your strength and to show no mercy to anyone who tries to get in your way. The bandits of Reikaku-zan are not to be taken lightly — I'm putting faith in you to prove to them that Seiryuu's soldiers are just the same way."

"We'll do it, Kayu-dono." The youngest member of the band said resolutely, nodding his head. "We'll go to Reikaku-zan and we'll get the relic. After all, we *are* soldiers… even if they're bandits, they're not trained the way we are. We'll defeat them and take the relic in Kintsusei-sama's name — no doubt about it!"

"Well, be careful." Kayu cautioned. "Don't act rashly if you can avoid it. It's a heavy responsibility the Emperor has put on us… don't let his trust in us be in vain."

He got to his feet, raising his hands to dismiss them.

"Till later today." He murmured. "When I trust, Seiryuu willing, we'll all meet once again to celebrate success."

"If Seiryuu's with us, we'll be fine." One of the soldiers said confidently, to murmurs of approval from his companions. "Don't worry, Kayu-dono. We won't fail."

With that they were gone, and Kayu sighed, leaning up against the sturdy wooden pillar that supported the heavy ceiling as he contemplated their naive enthusiasm.

"It's dangerous no matter who goes where." He realised. "And I have to trust them somewhat, else there was no point in my bringing

them. Besides, I*must* go to the village alone. That was where I last saw Aoi, after all — and therefore it's got to be where Maichu is, too. This part of my errand is a secret, and I must retrieve them myself. Besides, maybe when they realise everything that's happened, I'll be able to count on them for help, too. The girl is Suzaku's, and those two have always been at Seiryuu's command and pleasure. In the end, loyalties will speak for them. Plus, if Chichiri really doesn't look to fight, he might even be bartered with. The sooner I get this over with and rejoin the others at the mountain the better… then we can return to Kutou and maybe at last the Emperor will have what he's looking for!"

"So what exactly do we know about this relic anyway, Chichiri?"

As the group of travellers exited the sorcerer's *kasa* on the slopes of the bandit's mountain, Aoiketsu cast him a quizzical look, preoccupation in his blue eyes. "I was under the opinion that noone really knew where the thing was — are we really going to be able to find it that easily just because we now want to?"

It was early the following morning and, after breakfast under Aidou's watchful eye, the motley band had set out for Reikaku-zan's peak in search of Hisei's holy treasure. It was the beginnings of another bright, hot Kounan day, and, mindful of the fact time was of the essence, Chichiri had volunteered to use his magic to transfer them all to the blessed mountain.

Only Maichu and his injured travel companion had remained behind in the Eastern Village, for despite the improvement in the Meihi's health, Chichiri had been adamant that he would do better resting than poking around inside tunnels and caves. Much to Aoiketsu's surprise, Hyoushin had not argued the point — in fact he had seemed somewhat relieved, and the young soldier had realised that although his Commander's health had begun to stabilise, he was still physically weak. Maichu had immediately volunteered to stay behind to guard him, saying with some irony that someone ought to, and that he felt it safer to keep his distance from the mountain bandits where Suzaku's holy relic was concerned.

"If I don't know where it is, I can't be accused of tryin' to take it." He had said frankly, with all his usual bluntness. "So I'll stay back an' keep an eye on the Commander. After all, I came south because I wanted to stick with him, an' so I will."

With a laugh, Chichiri had agreed, and so the group had set off in search of their prize, each one wondering what secrets Suzaku's mage spirit might hold.

“Is it really all right to leave Hyoushin behind?” Myoume murmured, glancing back towards the direction of the village as she smoothed down her skirts. “He’s better this morning, true, but even so, his health is…”

“I don’t pretend to understand the Meihi’s remedy, but I do understand that it’s worked.” Chichiri offered her a lopsided grin, resting his hand gently on her shoulder as he did so. “And you did your bit to help him too, Myoume, I know that as well. He’s a strong man and I’m not afraid for his life from Miramu’s poison. But if we were to bring him with us — that might be too much for him to cope with at present. He slept fairly well last night, all things considered, and his fever was down again this morning thanks to the herahisa. But he should continue to take it easy so far as we can let him… the mountain is steep and treacherous in places and he’s not accustomed to Kounan’s hot climate. I think it’s far safer for him to remain where he is.”

“Maichu’s stayed with him anyway, Myoume.” Aoiketsu pointed out. “So it’s all right. He’s not on his own, so he can’t get into trouble.”

“I told Maichu of somewhere to take him, if he’s up to it.” Chichiri agreed. “Somewhere cool and shady where he can rest peacefully. After all, there’s no reason for him to go to Reikaku-zan like this. The relic we seek is Suzaku’s, not Seiryuu’s.”

“Suzaku’s, not Seiryuu’s.” Hikari murmured softly, and Aoiketsu cast her a keen glance, a question in his seiran eyes.

“Are you okay?” He murmured. “You’ve been distracted ever since the Commander spoke to you yesterday afternoon. Are you worried about this trip or something?”

“No…” Hikari flushed, shaking her head as she offered him a rueful smile. “No, it isn’t that. It’s just… I’ve been thinking over what Hyoushin-san said to me, that’s all. About… about being Seiryuu no Miko. And you know, that my destiny is to raise Seiryuu, not Suzaku after all. It’s a bit difficult to get my head around… but the more I think about it, the more I think he… he’s probably right.”

“That’s about how we felt when we realised it too, Hikari-chan.” Chichiri said wryly. “I won’t pretend I’m happy about the idea — even though I knew you had to go to Kutou, I had hoped that you might have been kept out of the most dangerous places. But I don’t think that’ll be possible, now. We’ve known that you were the focal point for all of this — and I don’t think that it will be easy to shelter you, in

the East."

"I… I don't mind." Hikari faltered, then nodded, resolution in her gaze. "I mean, I am scared about it. But at least… I think now I know why I'm here. Even if it is strange, it makes sense and I know what I have to do. I just have to find the strength to do it."

She tucked a wisp of dark hair behind her ear, casting the sorcerer a quizzical look.

"Do you really think that if we wake Hisei, we can use her magic to help out, too?"

"That's what we're going to find out, you know." Chichiri said frankly. "And here's Tasuki, right on cue. Shishi too, by the looks — well, I suppose this does involve her too, doesn't it?"

"Damn right it does." Shishi put in herself, overhearing the end of her uncle's remark as she sauntered over to join them, her father in tow. "Well? We've been waiting since dawn, just like you asked us to. What took you so long?"

"Some of us have a family to see to before we can head out on adventure, Shishi-chan." Chichiri chided, looking amused. He raised his gaze to his fellow Seishi, raising his eyebrow questioningly, and Tasuki nodded.

"Just as you thought." He agreed frankly. "Hisei's relic is buried deep within the heart of the mountain."

"You found it already?" Aoiketsu looked startled, and Tasuki eyed him for a moment, then shrugged.

"It wasn't that hard to do." He acknowledged. "Reikaku-zan's always been a holy mountain, after all. Blessed. S'why when people come here, they get touched by its power no matter who they are. Stands to reason that something has to be the cause of that. The heart of the mountain's always been sealed up, an' even when Hakurou-kashira was alive, noone tried to break through the inner walls. But Chichiri asked me in the message he sent to check it out. Shishi an' me, we cased it late last night. I ain't sure what it is — but there's somethin' there all right. An' I'm pretty sure it has Suzaku's touch about it."

"I guess my hunch was right then, you know." Chichiri's ruby gaze twinkled with satisfaction. "That you are Hisei's guardian, Tasuki-kun. I didn't think it'd be too hard for you to find it — if you just bothered to look."

“I felt something from it too. Or rather, Do-nee did.” Shishi cast her father a sheepish look, then shrugged. “She said that her sister mage was close by, but sleeping. So I think that must be the place we’re looking for.”

“Which means that we can go straight to it after all.” Hikari looked relieved. “Good.”

“I didn’t realise we were takin’ half of the local population down with us, though.” Tasuki glanced at Chichiri, who spread his hands.

“Aoi-kun has raised a mage, and knows a little about what happened when he did.” He said lightly. “Hikari is the Shinzahou and we need that, don’t we, if we’re going to bring her to human form? Otherwise we might end up with a situation like Shishi has — and one moonlighting mage spirit is enough, I think you’ll agree. You and I are Suzaku’s representatives — and Myoume is a Seishi of Byakko whose prophesies are guiding us. It seems appropriate that we are all here. Or are you worried about mountain security?”

“No, I guess not.” Tasuki relented, shaking his head. His gaze rested on Aoiketsu once again, then his lips twitched into a faint smile.

“I heard you helped the cub out on the journey north, kid.” He added. “I suppose if that’s the case, I can let you into my mountain. Since it seems that, Kutou spy or not, you’ve chosen to see sense now.”

Aoiketsu reddened, holding up his hands.

“I’m not going to cause any trouble, I promise.” He said hastily. “I’m here to help. Nothing else.”

“Well, if you have Hotohori-sama’s *shinken*, I suppose I must believe that.” Tasuki said pensively, and Aoiketsu frowned, brushing his fingers against the hilt.

“Hikari and Chichiri have both let me use it.” He admitted. “But I brought it today because… well, I know that you have to use blood to… to break the seals and waken a mage. And I… when I had the *shinken* before, I didn’t… Hyoushin-sama’s blood didn’t affect me. So I… I guess I hope it might be the same today. I want to help, after all.”

“The Meihi is still alive, then?” Tasuki asked, and Chichiri nodded.

“And growing stronger by the hour.” He confirmed. “Thanks to the potions of his people, it seems he will recover — at least enough to preserve his life, although I don’t know whether or not his injury will fully mend. Even so, though, he’s not up to making this climb. And I

didn't think that you'd welcome either him or his young companion into the heart of your territory so easily, Tasuki — so we left them behind in the village and came without them."

"The tribesman, perhaps." Tasuki admitted. "But the youngster — he's a bit of a hot-headed idiot, but I guess there's no harm in him. Still, I suppose someone has to keep watch on the Ri farm while you're up here, don't they?"

"I don't imagine they're going to stay there all day, you know." Chichiri looked amused. "A convalescent patient shouldn't be shut away inside a stuffy farmhouse when he could be out in the fresh air, after all."

Aoiketsu opened his mouth to comment on this, but as he did so, he caught sight of a flash of something out of the corner of his eye and instinctively he tensed, his fingers darting to the sword at his waist as he did so.

"Aoi-kun?" As he turned to survey the land behind them, Hikari put a hand out to touch his, anxiety in her hazel eyes. "What's going on? Something's wrong?"

"We have visitors." Tasuki's brows knitted together, and somehow Aoi realised in that split second the bandit's harisen had shifted from his back into the palm of his hand as he gestured to the caves beyond. "Your senses are pretty sharp, kid — I guess it's not going to be so easy to just walk in an' find what we're lookin' for."

"On our own friggin' territory?" Shishi snorted, drawing her own sword. "Where are they? And who? Kaou-zan's people? Shit, their timing sucks!"

"No, not Kaou-zan." Aoiketsu's gaze darkened as he caught sight of the figures slowly emerging from the bushes beyond. "Shit… of all people… of all times…"

He trailed off, indecision flickering in his gaze, and Tasuki's frown deepened.

"Friends of yours, I take it?" He asked quietly, and Aoiketsu bit his lip.

"Soldiers from Kutou." He admitted. "I'm sorry, Tasuki-san. This is my fault… because of the information I leaked back about Hisei's relic. Shishi called me on it — she said that it was your home and everything else. But I didn't think…"

"Enough time for gabbing about it later." Tasuki cut across him,

shaking his head. “Right now you need to tell your buddies to turn around an’ go home. They ain’t none of them more than kids as it is — and I don’t want to be accused of pickin’ fights with strangers.”

“Myoume, take Hikari and go into the mountain.” Chichiri said softly. “If they’re from Kutou… I don’t think she should be in the middle of this.”

“Aoi-nii!”

As the young men approached, the nearest one hesitated, lowering his sword as he caught sight of his fellow soldier. “But… what… why are you…? Have you come here too, on Kintsusei-sama’s orders?”

“For Kintsusei-sama’s sake, yes.” Aoiketsu said evenly. “Put your sword away, Gai. There’s no need to fight — we’re all on the same errand, after all.”

“No need to…?” The young man faltered, glancing at his comrade’s companions. Then he frowned, shaking his head.

“These are Suzaku’s people.” He whispered. “Are *you* a traitor too? A traitor to his Highness?”

“Noone’s a traitor to anyone, you idiot boy.” Shishi snapped. “But you an’ your buddies are trespassin’ and I’d advise you to shift out of here before we do you some serious damage.”

“I wasn’t talking to you, wench.” A second young man snapped at her insolently, and at his tone, Shishi bristled indignantly. “This isn’t a matter for girls, so keep out of what isn’t your business.”

“Not my business, huh?” Shishi’s eyes darkened, but Chichiri met her gaze, shaking his head slightly.

“You’re not to fight them.” He said quietly. “Until we understand what changes Doryoku has instilled in you, Shishi-chan — you are *not* to fight. All right? Tasuki told me what happened at Jin’s memorial — this whole mountain might come crashing down if you wake too much of that magic.”

“If they knew who I was, maybe they wouldn’t want to fight with me.” Hikari suggested, and Chichiri wheeled around, shooting her a dark glare.

“I told *you* to go inside already.” He said softly, and Aoiketsu started at the cold intent in his tones. “Do as you’re told… Myoume, please. Get her out of here.”

“All right.” Myoume nodded her head, sighing reluctantly but

taking Hikari by the hand. “Come on. Inside. Out of the way… one way or another, I think there’s going to be a battle of swords and you and I don’t have any place in it.”

“Shishi, you go too.” Tasuki added, his gaze not leaving the Kutou attackers. “Chichiri’s right about you — I don’t want to be pickin’ this place out of the rubble after we’re done. Go with them.”

“But I…”

“I said go.” Tasuki cut across her. “That’s an order from the Kashira, so do it already.”

“Shit, that’s not fair.” Shishi muttered, but nonetheless she sheathed her blade, trudging despondently in the direction her two companions had already gone.

“Aoi-nii, what’s going on?” The soldier named Gai spoke up again now, clearly trying to make sense of the exchange. “Why are you with these people… I don’t understand! You were sent here on the Emperor’s orders — weren’t you?”

“Yes.” Aoiketsu agreed. “That’s why I said we don’t need to fight.”

“We came for Hisei’s relic.” One of the youngsters piped in, and Gai, who was clearly the eldest sent him a dark glare.

“Shut up, pipsqueak. You’re not supposed to say that.”

“Not even to Aoi-nii?” The boy looked confused. “But isn’t he on *our* side?”

“I don’t know.” Gai admitted, turning his gaze back towards the other soldier. “Aoi-nii… we’re here because the Emperor sent us to get the relic from this mountain. If you’re going to try and stop us, we have to treat you as our enemy and we have to fight you. It’s how it is.”

“You’re too young to throw your lives away so easily.” Chichiri said softly, and Gai bristled.

“We’re not bad soldiers, ojisan.” He said curtly. “We were trained to fight properly, and we’re not going to be talked down from our duty to Kintsusei-sama.”

“Then it can’t be helped.” Tasuki sighed, slowly shaking his head as he raised his free hand, spreading the fingers wide as he did so. “Chichiri, follow the girls into the mountain an’ make sure they don’t wander off too far, okay? We’ll handle this here. Aoi, you go with him, if you like. If you don’t want to fight your old buddies, I’ll

understand… but we ain't got time to play with them."

"What about you?" Chichiri frowned, and Tasuki grinned, revealing fang-like teeth as he did so.

"This is my mountain." He said simply. "Do you think I'm so stupid as to leave the whole place unprotected?"

Almost as soon as he had spoken, there was a rustle of tree branches and two or three bandits emerged from the slope above, each one armed with a hefty blade of his own. Behind them came Kouji and, dressed in the attire of a mountain fighter, Shishi's mother Anzu, her own gleaming weapon firmly grasped in her right fist.

"We'll be fine." Tasuki added. "Leave it to us to protect Reikaku-zan, an' go see to the girls."

"I should have guessed." Chichiri's expression cleared. "All right. Just don't kill them if you can help it, Tasuki-kun. They are kids, after all — and boys with swords are still boys at the end of it."

"Don't worry. I know." Tasuki nodded his head. "Jus' trust me, okay?"

"Aoi, are you coming?" Chichiri shot him a questioning look, and Aoiketsu hesitated, then shook his head.

"No." He said quietly. "I'm staying to fight. If that's what it means, then that's what I'll do. To protect Hisei's relic and to protect Hikari… I'm staying here."

"Good call, kid." Tasuki shot him an approving grin. "All right. Then we'll see you inside, Chichiri… make sure the cub doesn't get in the midst of it all, won't you?"

"Without doubt, you know." Chichiri assured him, heading off in the direction of the cave as Tasuki squared himself, tapping his tessen absently against his left hand. From where he was standing, Aoiketsu saw the mark of the wings glitter across the bandit's bared skin, and he frowned, his own fingers tightening around the hilt of the *shinken* as he wondered what the Seishi was planning to do. For a moment Tasuki glanced at his weapon, then seemed to make up his mind, slipping it back into its usual travel position as instead he drew his own well-polished sword from its scabbard at his side. As he did so, Aoiketsu understood the unspoken message and a flicker of relief washed over him.

The bandit did not intend to fight to kill, then, despite the insult to his land.

Aoiketsu turned his attention back to the intruding soldiers, all of them now gathered with blades drawn behind their self-appointed spokesman as they eyed him with a mixture of confusion and indignation. They would fight with all they had, he realised, yet even so he knew he would not fight to kill, either. His opponents were boys he knew, boys he had trained with and helped to hone their skills during quiet times and between drills. Friends they had been, but Kutou's twisted politics had placed them on opposite sides of the fence.

"Fight to immobilise, not to kill." He murmured softly under his breath. "Message received loud and clear, Tasuki-san… I won't spill blood on your mountain either, if it can be helped."

"Of all people I never thought I'd fight *you* as a traitor." Gai remarked at this point, and Aoiketsu glanced at him, his eyes clouding as he shook his head.

"Everything I do is for Kutou's sake." He said gravely. "Everything I do is for the Emperor. I can't explain it to you — it's too dangerous to even try. But that's the truth of it, Gai-kun. I was raised like you were, to fight for the East. Everything I do is to that end."

"Holding Suzaku's holy blade, it hardly looks that way." Gai snapped. Aoiketsu shrugged.

"If holding the *shinken* means Kutou gets its peace, I'll do it and die holding it." He said grimly. "I don't want to fight you, Gai. You know I can beat you — I'm no weaker with this weapon than with my own, you know."

"Not if I draw blood from you." Gai said coldly, and Aoiketsu realised his companion wasn't going to be dissuaded. He sighed, raising the holy blade slowly into battle position. As he did so he thought he felt a flicker of energy trickle through the hilt and into his fingers, making his whole arm feel warm as though surrounded by some kind of holy light. He bit his lip, realising that once again he had risen Hotohori's spirit inside the blade. With a jolt he realised the reason — that he was holding the weapon in Kounan's defence, and that very cause had been one for which the original owner had considered worthy of sacrificing his own life.

"I've overcome that weakness for the time being." He said quietly now, inwardly hoping that his theory was right. "So that won't help you either."

"They're just boys, Genrou." Anzu dropped down on the ground between them, sending her partner a reproachful glance. "Are you

really expecting us to fight to kill?"

"No… just disarm them." Tasuki shook his head. "What do you think I am? But we can't let them run riot over Reikaku-zan — stun 'em if need be — but don't kill them. That's an order."

"As if a *woman* could kill any of us." The youngster who had been so disdainful towards Shishi earlier sent Anzu a disparaging look, and inwardly Aoiketsu winced at the boy's error in judgement, for Anzu's pretty features twitched into a look of irritation as she glanced from her sword to her prospective opponent.

"Kounan's great Emperor, Saihitei-heika taught me my grip, so it's not so easy to break." She said evenly. "Your mother would be ashamed of your manners, talking like that."

"Pay attention to *me*, Aoi, not the woman." Gai's voice cut through Aoiketsu's concentration at that point, and he started, jumping back as he felt the swish of a blade cut through the air in front of him. Frowning, he turned back to face his young opponent, taking in the resolution in the young man's dark eyes as he did so.

"That's better." The youngster nodded. "You're fighting *me* — not looking to some bandit woman for protection."

"If that's really what you want." Aoiketsu shrugged his shoulders, extending the *shinken* as he parried Gai's sword-thrusts back. "I may have been hiding in the south for a while, but I haven't lost my edge. And the only person who ever disarmed me is Hyoushin-sama."

"Hyoushin-sama is a traitor." Gai snapped, anger glittering in his eyes as he renewed his drive forward, swinging his weapon forcefully in Aoiketsu's direction. "If you still side with him, so are you."

"Hyoushin-sama would never betray the Emperor." Aoiketsu shot back, as the blades clattered together once more, sparks flying between them at the force of the blow. "You must be stupid if you believe anything otherwise. Hasn't he trained you since you were eight or nine, Gai-kun? It's fickle, turning your back on your Commander based on an unfounded rumour of deceit."

"The Emperor's will isn't deceit!" Gai exclaimed, launching himself once more in Aoiketsu's direction, and Aoiketsu feinted neatly left, pushing the weapon away as he shook his head.

"I never said it was." He returned. "I never said what you were doing had anything to do with the Emperor at all!"

"We came south on Kintsusei-sama's direct orders!" Gai objected.

“Kayu-dono told us…”

“*Kayu*?” Despite himself Aoiketsu faltered, only just managing to dodge the swing of the boy’s weapon as he registered the meaning of the boy’s words. “*Kayu*’s here in Kounan?”

“That’s none of your business either.” Gai snapped, readying himself for another assault, and Aoiketsu frowned, realising that if the conflict continued, one of them would wind up getting hurt.

“And if Kayu’s here, I need to find him before he gets himself into trouble.” He murmured. “Which means… I have to end this. Now. I’m sorry, Gai — but this will hurt less than if I used the blade to run you through.”

With that thought fresh in his mind, he swung the *shinken* around, taking careful aim as he stabbed the weapon forward, the pommel catching the young man across the side of the head. The soldier gasped, his eyes widening at the surprise of the blow, but Aoiketsu’s aim had been perfect and he deftly caught the crumpling form of his opponent in his arms, lowering him to the ground.

“That was easy.” Tasuki’s voice at his right hand made him turn and he nodded, sheathing his weapon as he stood back from Gai’s still body.

“He’s out for a while.” He agreed. “I didn’t want to hurt him, but…”

“It’s all right. They’re all taking a short nap.” Tasuki gestured to the surrounding area, and Aoiketsu realised that all of the young soldiers had been similarly immobilised. “Kouji and Anzu will take care of them from here — don’t worry, they won’t be hurt. We’ll just wait for them to sober up and ask them a few questions, that’s all — they won’t be going anywhere in a hurry.”

“Gai said Kayu was in Kounan.” Aoiketsu said softly, and Tasuki frowned, eying him keenly.

“And Kayu is…?”

“One of my fellow soldiers from Kutou.” Aoiketsu chewed down on his lip, contemplating. “He and I grew up together, sort of… he was orphaned in the war, like I was, but he was adopted by someone at court and raised the way I was — educated and trained as a soldier in Kutou’s name.”

“So he’s a buddy of yours and Maichu’s?”

“He is.” Aoiketsu agreed. “But…”

“But?”

“Kayu’s patron is Lord Kikei.” Aoiketsu admitted. “The Priest who’s behind all of this. So I don’t know… but I doubt… he’s here to help us out.”

“I see.” Tasuki’s brows knitted together. “But he isn’t here on Reikaku-zan?”

“I guess not.” Aoiketsu scanned the mountainside, then shook his head. “I don’t see him. He’s older than me — these are just kids, but Kayu’s a good soldier, and strong, too.”

“Strong as you, or not?”

“No… probably not.” Aoiketsu admitted. “But even so, he’d put up more of a fight than this lot.”

“Sending kids to fight a man’s battle.” Tasuki tut-tutted. “Your Emperor has issues, you know.”

“I don’t think Kintsusei-sama had anything to do with this.” Aoiketsu responded. “But if Kayu’s here, I should go find him. After all…”

“After all, your duty is to protect Hikari, ain’t it?” Tasuki raised his eyebrow, and Aoiketsu faltered, nodding his head.

“Yes, but…”

“If this Kayu’s come here, Aoi, he’s come for one thing.” Tasuki said quietly. “Suzaku’s treasure. An’ right now that’s inside my mountain — the Shinzahou an’ the relic both. If you leave here, that’s one less person to defend either of them from sticky fingers that want to use ’em — you understand that, don’t you? I don’t know where your buddy has got to — but right now the important things are on Reikaku-zan.”

“You’re right.” Aoiketsu admitted. “If Kayu has been sent here by Kikei, his errand has to be to find the Shinzahou. And that’s here, with us.”

“Right.” Tasuki clapped a heavy hand down on his companion’s shoulder. “An’ we’re wasting time. Since my bandits can clean up this shower of troublemakers without me holdin’ their hands, we should rejoin the cub an’ her companions an’ see about wakin’ this mage spirit — certainly before any kind of reinforcements arrive.”

“All right.” Aoiketsu nodded, allowing himself to be led across the grass to the crack in the dark stone where his travel companions were

anxiously awaiting him.

“Are you okay?” As they slipped into the darkness, Hikari hurried forward, grasping Aoiketsu’s hands in hers as she anxiously examined them for any sign of injury. “You had to fight your own people, Aoi — are you all right?”

“We just knocked them out.” Aoiketsu shook his head. “That’s all. It’s fine. They’re not going to cause any more trouble here.”

“In which case, we’ve wasted enough time.” Chichiri reflected. “Since I came through here, I’ve tried to sense out the mage’s dormant magic and I think maybe I’ve succeeded — but I want your confirmation, Tasuki-kun. Are we heading forward and down towards the very core of this mountain?”

“Yes.” Tasuki agreed. “In which case, we’ll need light.”

“I already solved that.” Shishi held out an armful of wooden torches. “I figured since you wouldn’t let me fight, I had to do something useful. Here you go, Pa… Kashira. I found three at least — one for you, one for me, and one for Chichiri.”

“Good kid.” Tasuki looked approving, pulling his tessen from his back once more. “Hold still — I’ll flame ‘em… don’t move else it’ll be your hair I’m settin’ light to instead.”

“Okaa-san would skin you, if you did that.” Shishi said, unperturbed as she did as she was bidden. “You don’t scare me, you know, sayin’ shit like that.”

“Are you sure it’s okay to use the tessen inside the cave?” Hikari asked doubtfully, and Tasuki nodded, twitching it in the direction of the wood as a faint flicker of flame glittered along the edge of the metal. It licked up against the dry timber, blazing each into a sturdy light as it did so, and Chichiri took one, sending his friend a grin.

“You know, the control you have over that thing is amazing, these days.” He reflected. “All right. I suppose there’s nothing to do but go forward now.”

“I’ve never been really deep inside the mountain before.” Hikari remarked, as they began their careful descent along the uneven, rocky floor. “It’s like when we came to find you, Myoume — playing hunt the treasure in the caves.”

“Not quite like that, hopefully.” Shishi muttered, and Hikari bit her lip, sending her companion a guilty glance.

“I’m sorry, Shishi. I didn’t mean it that way.” She said

apologetically. “I just meant… you know…”

She trailed off, and Shishi shrugged, offering her a faint smile.

“It’s all right.” She said frankly. “I think he’s still with us, when we’re on the mountain at the very least. And I know you weren’t thinking of that… it’s okay.”

“This mountain isn’t like Kumo-zan.” Myoume reflected, brushing her fingers absently against the smooth stone walls of the passage as she did so. “There’s no gems to be found here — Reikaku-zan’s never been any kind of crystal mine. You can tell by the seams — the rock is completely different in the way it’s structured.”

“Damn right it ain’t a mine.” Tasuki said bluntly. “It’s a bandit keep and it has been for a long time. Reikaku-zan’s been guarded by Sanzoku for generations — do you think that we’d need to take toll if we could pull gemstones out of the walls at whim?”

“The Kanin Mountains in Sairou covered a whole lot of old mineshafts though, Papa.” Shishi explained. “Where we met Myoume, there was this beautiful place… made by the Byakko Seishi in the heart of the mountains. It was like the stones were stars… making out the constellations of Byakko on the roof of the chamber.”

“Stars, huh?” Tasuki snorted. “I see. Well, each to their own.”

“*Is* it very far down?” Aoiketsu asked. “Hisei, I mean… is it really buried deep?”

“Fairly deep.” Tasuki agreed. “Hey, kid, is what Chichiri said earlier true? About you an’ Seiryuu’s mage spirit — you were there when it was found?”

“Maichu and I retrieved the relic from an underground cave in Kutou.” Aoiketsu agreed. “It was really strange, actually. There are a lot of underground water sources in Kutou — probably because of Seiryuu and the water dragon connection. But Suiko’s scale was hidden underneath one of the sacred pools there — we had to swim down to a chamber underwater to find her shrine. And when we did, it was like a barrier was over it to keep the water out.”

“What did it look like inside, this shrine?” Chichiri asked, and Aoiketsu frowned.

“It was… beautiful.” He admitted, his memory flitting back to the moment he and Maichu had first set foot in the underwater chamber. “There were a lot of depictions of Seiryuu on the walls — it was like it hadn’t been touched in a long time, though. And there was a door to a

room beyond. We tried to get it open, and I… I cut my hand trying to shift the door aside. When I did, it moved… just enough so that we could push it back and get in. The scale was in a chest, protected by blue flame."

"Blue… flame?" Tasuki echoed, and Aoiketsu nodded.

"Yes." He agreed. "But when I put my hand in to take it, the flame seemed to go out. I wasn't really watching it — I was bleeding and I didn't feel all that good. But Maichu said my blood put out the fire. And that's why I could take the box back to the surface."

He grinned.

"If I'm Nakago's son, it makes sense now." He added. "But that's what happened. It wasn't easy to get."

"Well, Suzaku's element is fire, so I don't think we'll be facing a swim to get to Hisei's relic." Myoume murmured.

"Kitora's shrine was just a chamber with a statue of Byakko in the centre." Shishi added softly, and Aoiketsu could hear the emotion in her voice. "I guess that Miramu opened it using his blood, because it was open when we got there. And when he and Jin… and then Myoume came… we didn't… we didn't have to get through any real barriers to reach it. But I think… the fang was in a chest, too. Under Byakko's front paw."

"Yes." Myoume confirmed. "And Doryoku didn't have a shrine — just a hiding place where Bachisu-san concealed her till Shishi came to release her. So each of the Gods is different when it comes to protecting his mage spirit. We can't really assume what happened with any of the others will happen with Hisei — or what kind of a spirit she'll be."

"Doryoku might know more." Hikari suggested, casting Shishi a glance, and the young bandit nodded her head.

"She does." She agreed. "At least, about the mage spirits themselves. She says that they're woken by the blood of their guardian or one of the chosen of the beast God. And that the one who wakes the mage has to do so with pure heart and spirit, because otherwise things can go kinda wrong. It's something to do with the essence of that person's spirit inside the blood used… I don't understand what she means, but that's what she said."

"Interesting." Chichiri's gaze narrowed. "So in her case, she was awoken by Bachisu's blood?"

“Yes.”

“And it was given freely and in good faith, so she’s not turned out to be psycho?” Hikari asked. Shishi shrugged.

“I guess so.” She agreed.

“Miramu woke Kitora.” Myoume’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t know what kind of spirit my brother possesses, but I’m sure it’s not pure in any regard these days. And Suiko… Aoi woke Suiko. What about that, Shishi? Does Doryoku know what kind of impact that might have, if it’s not actually a Seishi who stirs a mage?”

“Doryoku says she’s never heard of that happening before.” Shishi shook her head. “So she hasn’t a clue. She did say, though, that she can’t imagine Aoi’s blood is as strong as a real Seishi’s blood — so Seiryuu’s mage spirit might not be as strong as Kitora is or she is.”

“That’d make sense.” Aoiketsu admitted. “She did whine a lot about the fact she was less powerful away from the Shinzahou. Maichu and Hyoushin-sama might know more about that, though — and about Kitora. I only travelled with Suiko, and I didn’t meet Kitora at all. Maichu did call her ‘catwoman’, once — and mentioned that she was rather… crazy. But I don’t really know much else.”

“The spirit of Amefuri, in fact, in all his twisted glory.” Shishi muttered. Myoume sighed, nodding her head.

“So it seems.” She said guiltily. “I wish I’d thought to retrieve the fang sooner, to be honest. If I had, maybe I could have woken Kitora’s spirit… but just like my brother said himself, I can’t undo things already done.”

“None of us can.” Chichiri said matter-of-factly. “So it’s better to focus on what we can do, instead.”

“That sounds strange, coming from you, buddy.” Tasuki said wryly, and Chichiri sent him a rueful look, shaking his head.

“Time passes.” He said simply. “And this is the here and now.”

At that moment they stepped into a more open chamber, the walls smooth and clean as if carefully polished that way by bandits of the past, and Aoiketsu wondered absently if it had once been used by smugglers when the mountain had taken a more active role in hoarding illegal goods over the Western border. Tasuki placed his torch in a sconce, gesturing for Shishi and Chichiri to follow suit, and then he stood back, folding his arms across his chest.

“This is where it was.” He said unecessarily. “This place… where

Shishi an' me both felt somethin' was calling."

Chichiri held up his fingers, frowning for a moment, then nodding his head.

"I can feel something, too." He agreed. "Some flicker of magic lying dormant somewhere in this area. Tasuki, you can feel it again now? Is it drawing you towards it as much as it is me?"

"Yep." Tasuki agreed evenly. "A sort of buzzing warmth somewhere beneath us. But I'm not sure where the seal is, exactly."

"Aoi-kun, what did the seal look like in Seiryuu's underwater shrine?" Chichiri asked.

"I remember seeing the characters for Suiko's name." Aoiketsu furrowed his brow as he tried to remember. "The characters for 'water' and 'call'. That was the first clue we had that she was there… so I suppose it might be the same for Hisei."

"Hisei." Hikari said slowly. "How would you write that? Hi… would be fire, wouldn't it? If Suiko began with 'mizu', maybe Hisei follows the same pattern?"

"Suzaku is the firebird." Myoume agreed. "I'd think that would be a good guess. Kitora is made up of 'wood' and 'tiger', after all… wood is Byakko's element."

"And Doryoku is 'earth' and" power. "Shishi added." Because she just told me so."

"Your kanji isn't as bad as you think it is, Hikari-chan." Chichiri told her playfully, and the schoolgirl snorted, shaking her head.

"That's first year grade school kanji." She said derisively. "Of course I'd know that."

"So we're looking for the character for fire, and one other?" Aoiketsu asked. Chichiri nodded.

"That seems to be the case." He agreed. "Shishi, does Doryoku know what other character Hisei uses to write her name?"

"Star!"

Before Shishi could answer, Hikari let out an exclamation, pressing her hands to the wall of the chamber as she gazed at the sorcerer excitedly. "Look, Chichiri — look! '*Hoshi*!' That can be read as 'sei'… can't it?"

"The kid's right." Tasuki came to stand beside her, running his

finger over the worn section of rock as he nodded his head. “Fire and star. Hi Sei. I think she’s got it.”

“I suppose you’re drawn to this place too, Hikari-chan.” Chichiri reached out to touch it, offering her a smile. “It feels right to me, Tasuki. I guess this is where you come in.”

“I guess so.” Tasuki agreed, glancing at it and then at the wall. Then he shrugged, pulling his pocket knife from his belt. He slashed the blade deftly across his palm, holding it up, then pressing it carefully against the two worn characters in the stone face.

At first, nothing happened. Then, with a slight shudder, the chamber began to vibrate as a crack split the wall from top to bottom. Tasuki jumped back with an exclamation as fragments of rock rained down on him, and Hikari let out a yell, grabbing hold of Aoiketsu’s hand as she stared up at the opening crevasse in disbelief.

“The whole chamber might fall on us!” She whispered, but Chichiri shook his head.

“It’s fine, you know.” He murmured. “This mountain’s built to handle this — and even if it isn’t, I’ll make sure nothing happens to us. Or had you forgotten that I can project barriers as well as pull people into hats, Hikari-chan?”

“I guess so.” Hikari looked sheepish. “It just… it made me jump.”

“Looks like there’s a chamber beyond.” Myoume murmured, and Shishi darted forward, peering around the crack.

“Shit.” She whispered. “It’s just like a proper friggin’ shrine in there. No doubt about it — I can feel somethin’ pulsin’, an’ this place is like… some kind of holy offerin’ of some kind.”

“Then I guess we’ve found it.” Tasuki said simply, exchanging looks with his sorcerer companion who nodded his head slowly.

“Well, this should prove interesting.” He murmured. “Let’s go in.”

Chapter 18

Chapter Seventeen

“Are you sure that you really want to go this far?”

Maichu cast his companion a glance, a flicker of concern stirring in his dark eyes as he observed the Meihi’s slow, faltering progress. It was still early, yet the sun had already begun to climb in the dazzling azure sky, and the young soldier knew that although as yet temperatures had not climbed into the highest range, it was still a bright, warm morning in Kounan.

Going to the stream had been Chichiri’s idea, for before they had left he had murmured in the young soldier’s ear about the wild fruit trees that populated the area and Maichu, still concerned by his Commander’s lack of appetite had agreed immediately at the prospect of a quiet, peaceful hideaway which would not only be cool but from which he might be able to coax the Meihi to eat. The stream was not far from the village, but even despite that fact, Maichu was beginning to have second thoughts about his decision. Though he had not complained, Hyoushin was making heavy weather of the slight climb, and guilt flared in the soldier’s heart as he registered his companion’s evident distress.

If the Emperor had seen his Meihi associate now, he would likely not have even recognised him, Maichu reflected, for there was no sign of the usually immaculate Kutou soldier in either Hyoushin’s bearing or his appearance. His thick silver hair fell limp against his back in a single tail, tied roughly at the nape of his neck by a loosely knotted length of ribbon, and wisps of it had worked quickly loose, framing the man’s face and somehow accentuating the exotic, tribal nature of his appearance. His amethyst eyes, normally so impassive were clouded by a mixture of pain and something that Maichu could not quite verify, and not for the first time since they had left Hokkan, he was struck by the fact his Commander was not infallible.

As he had watched his companion obstinately dress himself before they had left the farm, tying his own hair even though the fingers of his right hand struggled to bring the strands into a correct, firm knot, Maichu had acknowledged ruefully that the Meihi’s illusion of invulnerability had been well and truly shattered. To see him weak and struggling had been somewhat unnerving, but also, as he had

pondered on it, the forthright young soldier had realised something else.

“He’s always appeared unbreakable, but he’s just like Aoi an’ me.” He had mused. “At the end of it, the Commander is a man, with doubts an’ feelin’s an’ fears… an’ somehow knowin’ that… makes him seem stronger, not weaker. He’s taken Miramu’s poison an’ shit, I ain’t got a clue how he must be feelin’. I know it must hurt like hell, yet he ain’t complainin’ about it, because there ain’t any point in complaining. An’ that’s how he’s always been, now I think it over. He’s always just got on with whatever came his way… no matter how he felt about it. It makes me sort of wonder what other kind of shit he’s fought through to get this far.”

Hyoushin had insisted on bringing his sword with him, even though he was unable to wield it, and even in the short walk it had become more of a supporting stick than any kind of potential weapon as he forced his tired, aching body onwards. He was dressed in simple, Kounan peasant attire, borrowed from Chichiri since his own woollen Meihi robes had been destroyed from the blood and the attempts to save his life that had quickly followed. He had been upset, Maichu remembered, to learn the fate of the garments, though he had not revealed his reasons why, and Maichu had wondered at his sensible, unsentimental Commander’s uncharacteristic reaction.

“But it ain’t like he’s really been himself since we left Hokkan, an’ I guess he’s still buzzin’ with poison of some sort or other.” he reflected. “It’s hot an’ he’s tired an’ in pain… I guess that can skew with your judgement, even if you’re the Commander.”

He paused, eying his companion again as he took in the faint flushing in the normally chalk-pale cheeks.

“Hyoushin-sama, if it’s too far… we can go back to the farm, you know. It’s no big deal to me. After all, it doesn’t matter where exactly we are, so long as we keep out of trouble until Chichiri-san and the others get back from the mountain… right?”

“Your concern is appreciated, Maichu.” Hyoushin paused to catch his breath, leaning on the sword as he did so. “But if I cannot make even this short a distance, what use will I be when we go East? I am equal to it… I am just taking a little more time over it than perhaps I normally would.”

“You don’t look so good.” Maichu told him bluntly. “I thought you looked kinda sicky when we got to Kounan, but shit, right now… you look like you might fall down an’ not get up again, an’ I don’t want to

face Aoi if that happens."

"I see that you have taken to heart my instruction not to concern yourself with good manners over honesty." Despite his weariness, there was a faint flicker of humour in Hyoushin's words, and Maichu frowned, shrugging his shoulders.

"Well, right now, I'm sort of protecting you, aren't I?" He said frankly. "It's kinda surreal, really, but it's that way. Even though you have your sword… you can't use it. Can you? So it's kind of… different. It doesn't seem… right now… like you are the Commander. You don't seem at all like yourself since we came here, you know. Even when we were travelling — but now more than ever."

"I see." Hyoushin's expression flickered slightly with something that might have been genuine emotion, then he frowned.

"I am sorry." He said softly. "I am a burden to you, aren't I, in this state?"

"No, not at all." Maichu held up his hands hurriedly, shaking his head. "I didn't mean it that way. It's just… shit, sir, I'm not used to you not knowing all the answers. Since we've been here, I've been taken prisoner by bandits… and you've been shot by a poisoned arrow. It's like total new rules have come into play. When Aoi, Kayu and I were here before, it was on your orders, and with the Emperor's blessing. But… he's not given us that this time. And you… it seems like you have doubts, I guess. About what we're doing. About… whether it's right, acting against Kutou like this."

Hyoushin glanced up at the sky.

"It's not far to the stream, you say?" He asked quietly. "If we could reach it before it becomes too hot, I would be grateful. There is time enough to discuss things there… if there is anything to discuss at all."

"Oh. Yeah. For sure." Maichu looked sheepish. "We're almost there. It's really a nice place, Hyoushin-sama. It's sheltered and shady, and Chichiri said it's probably the coolest place in the area at the moment. Plus the stream is pure and good for drinking water, so we didn't need to bring any with us. Look — it's just over that rise. You can see the trees from here."

"Ah. Indeed I can." Relief tinged the Meihi's voice. "Then it would be foolish to attempt to walk back, wouldn't it? Considering that we are almost there."

"I suppose so." Maichu acknowledged. "I just… I suppose I don't really know what to do, when I'm the one holding the sword."

“It isn’t easy to make decisions for other people, sometimes.” Hyoushin acknowledged, as they reached the edges of the clearing, pausing as they selected the most secluded place to sit. “Yes. This place will do very well. Already I feel somewhat cooler… to sit somewhere in the shade will do me the world of good, I think. You need not worry quite so much about me, you know… I am stronger than you think I am. I am not about to die quite so easily… if I was, I would have succumbed to Miramu’s poison.”

“That’s true.” Maichu agreed, as the Meihi dropped awkwardly down against the trunk of an old tree, settling himself more comfortably on the ground. His young companion followed suit, toying idly with blades of glass as he did so.

“Hyoushin-sama… you’re worried about the Emperor, aren’t you?” He asked quietly, and Hyoushin nodded his head.

“Yes.” He agreed. “That is my greatest concern at present… what might have occured in Kutou. I am quite certain that events are not going according to his plans, and Kikei is a smart individual. Whilst I don’t think he will kill Kintsusei-sama, I believe he might try to manipulate him.”

“But the Emperor’s a smart man. He’ll realise, won’t he?”

“Perhaps. But if he does, perhaps then Kikei will have no choice but to dispatch his shadow to silence him.” Hyoushin said gravely. “Yes, it concerns me a good deal. And I want to go back as soon as we can… as soon as we’re able. If I was not so injured, Maichu, I would seek to leave today. But as it is…”

“As it is, you wouldn’t survive the journey.” Maichu sighed, sitting back against the tree and closing his eyes. “I don’t think even Kikei’s crazy enough to kill the Emperor, though.”

“A man who probably betrayed his own people to death and destruction?” Hyoushin asked. “I beg to differ. I think he is very capable of it… I wish I had realised it earlier. That of all the potential dissidents at his court, the most dangerous was the one who gifted him the throne in the first place. Kikei is a Hin, and I overlooked that fact… but in truth, it is the crux of the whole matter.”

“How do you mean?” Maichu’s eyes snapped open, and he looked surprised. “Because he’s a Hin, he’s bad? Hyoushin-sama, that sounds weird — especially coming from you.”

“Mmm, but I do not mean it in the way you think.” Hyoushin shook his head. “All I mean is that as yet Kintsusei-sama has been unable to

get enough support from his ministers to alter the laws regarding men of tribal birth and the governmental positions."

"Come again?" Maichu looked blank, and despite himself, Hyoushin's lips twitched into a faint smile.

"I am glad you are a better swordsman than you are a political statesman." He said chidingly. "You are oblivious of the intricacies of court, aren't you, Maichu?"

"I'm a soldier. I let Aoi care about those things." Maichu admitted. "I guess I didn't think it was important if I knew them or not. I'm never going to read or write or know enough to pass any exams and I don't want that life, anyway. I want to protect Kutou — you don't need to study politics to do that."

"Quite true." Hyoushin acknowledged. "However, in this case, it would be as well for you to know it. Currently the law of Kutou is that men of tribal birth are not permitted to enter the examination process or become government officials beneath the crown."

"Really?" Maichu frowned. "Shit. Then… is that why you hid who Aoi was, then? Because he's smart and might pass them one day — and he's got Hin blood?"

"Not really, although I suppose it became part of it as time went on." Hyoushin shook his head. "He bears the name Kaiga, he carries the ring — he would not be refused, as the son of an influential noblewoman such as Kaiga Ruiren-sama. No. But in Kikei's case, it means that his only source of power is to pursue the religious life in the way that he has. And with Kutou in such unrest, he has far closer counsel with the Emperor than many of the ministers do. Kintsusei-sama does not know who among his council he can trust. So instead he trusts in Kikei. And so long as civil rioting continues… so will Kikei's grasp on power within Kutou. But if we were to bring peace…"

"Kikei would just be a priest." Maichu's face cleared. "I get it. Shit, that's crafty. So you think… all the civil war and stuff…"

"I begin to wonder." Hyoushin admitted. "He took in many lost souls after the war, like Kayu, and trained them and farmed them out to different areas of the country. I wonder whether now he reaps his reward from their loyalty and gratitude. Kayu's actions in Hokkan made me question that exact fact… whether he too had been placed within my regiment as a tool and a puppet, or whether his placement was simply a matter of convenience when it came to my removal."

"Kayu's not someone who'd betray the Emperor." Maichu said

slowly. “I believe that. But I also think he’s been an idiot in believing that note came from Kintsusei-sama. Probably because he can’t see Kikei objectively… like we can. Even so, though, I don’t think he’s capable of active treason. If he found all this out…”

“Even if he did, I think he would find it hard to sever his loyalties from the man to whom he owes everything.” Hyoushin said quietly. “But we digress. My point is that since Kikei cannot take the exams or become an official, he has an interest in gaining power in other ways. And all of this is leading to that exact fact.”

“I suppose if that’s Kutou’s law, sir, you’re also barred from becoming any kind of official, aren’t you?” Maichu realised. Hyoushin nodded.

“Currently.” He agreed. “Although like you, I would not pass a written exam. Besides, it has never been my interest to become politically engaged in any regard. I am the Emperor’s man and his defender. I am a soldier, just like you are. The law does not trouble me any… although I would also like to see it repealed, for the sake of others who might wish to follow that dream.”

He hesitated, then he smiled.

“I am glad you came to Kounan with me, although I am sorry for your having to choose thus.” He added. “Knowing I have people who trust in me has helped me, I think. In truth, I don’t know which way the way forward is — not if we were to be wholly on our own. To approach Seiryuu no Miko would not have been possible without Aoiketsu’s daring and decisiveness. And I’m not sure if I would have made it so far this way without your navigational recollections. You are both invaluable to me, you know. And when this is over, if we are all still alive to settle it, I will ensure that the Emperor knows of your loyalty as well.”

Maichu looked startled, then he grinned, shaking his head.

“It’s not important to me if he knows or not.” he said honestly. “I just… it’s what I always wanted to do. To grow up and, you know, protect my country. To have a story to tell my kids, one day, that I helped to bring peace to Kutou. That I wasn’t one of the people who stood by and watched and let other people get killed without doing anything about it. I wanted to be like my cousin — he believed in it, and so do I. My family might think I’m nuts — but that’s what I want. That’s why I came south with you. Because I know it’s what you want too, sir. And I believe in you.”

“Such faith is not easily come by in Kutou.” Hyoushin admitted.

“Especially not to an oddity of a Commander with fated tribal blood. But I am glad of it all the same.”

His lips twitched once more into a smile.

“Even if it is ironic that you are currently my protector.” He added. “Your swordsmanship is strong, Maichu, but even so…”

“If you were fit, you’d knock the blade out of my hands.” Maichu said ruefully. “I know. But you’re not. And I’m not a pushover, either. When that Tasuki guy gave me my blade back, he told me to use it properly, and not waste it or my potential. He said that I’d obviously been trained properly an’ that he was glad I hadn’t gone full fury at that Shishi kid when she jumped me. He’s a pretty scary kind of guy, somehow, but he seems straight down the line, too. So I guess I can’t be that bad, if a stranger says somethin’ like that.”

“I am in no hurry to spend much time with the legendary fire-throwing bandit of Reikaku-zan.” Hyoushin said wryly. “I am already quite warm enough, thank you.”

“Oh! Do you want me to get some water from the stream?” Maichu was on his feet in an instant, and Hyoushin shook his head.

“No… as it happens, I am quite content.” He responded. “It is nice here. Peaceful. I don’t feel like anything has been peaceful around me for some time… it’s nice. Chichiri was right to recommend it.”

“Yeah, it ain’t bad.” Maichu agreed. “And hey, the trees here have wild fruit, too… it’s supposed to be pretty refreshing. I’m kinda hungry, so I might go pick some… I’ll bring some back for you too, sir.”

“I’m not overly hungry, Maichu.”

“I know, but Chichiri wants you to eat and if you don’t, everyone’ll get pissed at me.” Maichu reasoned. “Besides, you need to. Seriously, sir. It’s going beyond a joke now… even Aidou-san hasn’t made you eat more than a few scraps here and there. Humour me, huh? Fruit’s fresh an’ it’ll give you energy… if we’re goin’ to Kutou, won’t you need that?”

Hyoushin sighed, his gaze flitting to the sword that lay beside him on the ground. Slowly he put his right hand over its blade, as if debating with himself. Then he nodded his head.

“Very well.” He said at length. “Do so. Your words are sensible, and I am not ignorant of the need for good nutrition. I will indeed need strength to face the dangers in our homeland… perhaps I can stomach

a little."

"Okay." Maichu nodded his head, sending his companion a grin. "I'll be right back… don't go anywhere, okay?"

"I don't believe I will, Maichu. You need not concern yourself with that." Hyoushin assured him, a faint note of irony in his tones, and despite himself, Maichu looked rueful.

"Sorry. I guess not." He acknowledged. "All right. Even so, though, I won't be long. Aoi and I were here practicing swords yesterday, so I know where I'm going — it won't take me a minute to climb up and hoick a few down."

Without waiting for his Commander to respond, he headed into the trees, pulling his sword from his belt as he eyed the branches above him thoughtfully.

"If I climb that one, I should be able to reach a few boughs and that'll do us." He reflected. "At least I talked him around — maybe he really is starting to feel better. I guess it takes more than a bastard assassin to bring down Kutou's Commander, after all. Thank Seiryuu for that… at least Aoi and I aren't on our own after all!"

As the group of travellers stepped over the threshold and into the shrine beyond, all of them were struck speechless by the scene of wild beauty that lay out before them. Despite the dark depths of the chamber's location, and the fact that until a few moments before the shrine had been sealed from all outside intrusion, tongues of red-gold flame danced and glittered in corner sconces, covering the whole scene a warm, protective haze. In the centre of the chamber, a ring of red stone surrounded another flare of spectral amber fire that burned with vibrant light even though there was no evidence of any fuel at its base. The room itself had been carved out of the rock, but it did not seem to have been the work of human hands and as Hikari tentatively reached out a finger to touch the dips and grooves, she realised that they were remeniscent of talon marks — as if a hawk's claws had cleaved the hiding place into existance.

"A hawk… or a phoenix." She whispered, feeling a tingle of something across her skin as she gazed up at the bright, vibrant imagery that adorned the entirety of the shrine's four walls. Pictures of Suzaku, in vivid reds, ambers and gold soared over their heads, as fresh as if they had been painted yesterday, and the bird's piercing brimstone gaze stared down at them as if judging each of them individually on their right to be here. As Hikari ran her gaze along the

walls she saw that the murals each depicted something — and her heart stilled in her chest as she realised one of the images showed a clear night sky, with seven sparkling white constellations marked out with chips of pearl-white marble. Beneath the sky, a sole figure stood somewhat in shadow, obscured enough by the careful artwork to be unrecogniseable, and yet Hikari somehow knew who the person was.

"The Suzaku constellations?" She asked softly, and Chichiri nodded, coming to stand beside her as he ran his fingers carefully over each one.

"Without doubt." He agreed pensively. "These are Suzaku's stars — the seven pieces of Suzaku's magic flung wide into this world to help it continue to exist."

"Which… which one is… father's?" Hikari glanced at him, and Chichiri grinned, pointing to a cluster of five tiny white specks.

"That one is Tamahome." He replied.

"And yours? And Tasuki's?"

"This is Chichiri." Chichiri moved to touch another constellation. "And that one — the one with the most stars of all — is our bandit's stellar self."

"Then this… this is… mother?" Hikari brushed her finger against the cloaked figure. "Suzaku no… Suzaku no Miko, watched over by her stars?"

"I think so, you know." Chichiri nodded. "Of course, this picture has been here for generations. It's a prophesy, if you like — a prediction that one day Suzaku would be summoned by a Miko who would use her power and the power of her Seishi to save Kounan and bring it peace. I don't know precisely how old Reikaku-zan is, but I'd bet this has been in place almost as long as the mountain has. When Suzaku first blessed this world."

"Does that mean… this is where the Seishi spirits originally came from, then?" Shishi asked, her tones uncharacteristically muted by the effect of the chamber's atmosphere. Chichiri shrugged.

"I don't know." He admitted. "Maybe. Perhaps Suzaku devised this place to protect Hisei, and then flung us out into the ether to start lives of our own… it's impossible to tell this far into the future. We weren't always Seishi, though our spirits have undoubtedly lived lives before these. The difference is that, in this life, Tasuki and I — and the others — were called on by the Phoenix to protect Kounan. We completed this prophesy — but even Suzaku probably didn't know

precisely when it would come into play. He laid the foundations… it was up to us to carry it out."

"And you did." Hikari offered him a slight smile, and Chichiri grinned.

"We did." He agreed.

"Well, at least if that's the case, he ain't gonna be too pissed at us for breaking into this chamber like this." Tasuki said ruefully, wrapping a length of fabric around his slashed palm as he gazed around him. "Shit, and all this was hidin' beneath our feet all the time. A bandit mountain… that Suzaku's got some odd taste, for sure."

"It's beautiful." Myoume murmured, taking a step or two towards the furthest wall. "Suzaku placed this here inside somewhere like this — no wonder Reikaku-zan is called a blessed mountain, Tasuki, when it houses something like this."

"Hotohori-sama's sword is glittering." Aoiketsu pulled the blade from its sheath, glancing at it, then at his Seishi companions. "It's buzzing and throbbing, Chichiri — I think that whatever part of his spirit that's left can feel the aura of this place, too."

"I suppose it can." Carefully Chichiri took the blade from the young soldier's grip, holding it up as he ran his fingers over it. A faint smile touched his lips, and he nodded.

"I can feel his Highness's chi flaring through the metal." He agreed. "Saihitei-sama is long since dead and buried and his spirit is born into a new form, so he can't be resurrected here. But what he charged this blade with to protect Miaka still feels Suzaku's pull in this place — *Hotohori* is here with us in some respect after all. I think that proves beyond all doubt that we've found Suzaku's hiding place — and that Hisei's relic really is somewhere here."

"The question is, though, where?" Myoume turned, glancing around her as she did so. "It's not like Kitora's shrine. There's no statue of the God here."

"No… no statue." Chichiri looked thoughtful as he gazed up at the pictures. "I suppose that Suzaku's not really the kind of spirit you can confine into cold hard metal or stone. After all, his Shinzahou is testament to that — Suzaku is the God of love and of rebirth. In his divine shrine… I wouldn't have expected him to keep something so precious locked inside something so barren."

"Maybe it's something to do with this." Hikari crossed the chamber towards the centre, where the biggest of the five fires burned. "The

fire… Aoi, what did you say about Suiko's shrine and blue fire? Maybe this is protecting Hisei… maybe because Suzaku's element is fire, the relic is somewhere in the flames."

"Don't touch it, Hiki." Shishi said sharply, as her friend reached out tentatively to touch the edges of the flame. "You idiot — you don't go thrusting your fingers into fire without knowing what you're doing!"

"Shishi's right." Chichiri grasped Hikari by the arm, shaking his head. "We don't know what that fire is made from, and I don't want you to be hurt."

"But if I'm part of Suzaku too, surely he wouldn't hurt me?" Hikari looked startled. Chichiri frowned.

"You're Suzaku's *and* Seiryuu's. Right now I don't know which element is stronger." he admitted. "Besides… you might be the Shinzahou, but it's not usual for a holy treasure to be a person. Even though you are, there's no guarantee that you can even access Hisei on your own. It's not your duty to do so, you know."

"Meaning, I suppose, that it's mine?" Tasuki sent Chichiri a rueful glance, and Chichiri shrugged.

"Possibly." He said cautiously. "Fire is your element too, Tasuki-kun. Your tessen throws fire through a spell, doesn't it? Suzaku connected to that and strengthened both it and you — it would make sense, wouldn't it, that the relic could be retrieved by one Suzaku had trusted with flame?"

"I guess so." Tasuki unwrapped his injured hand, glancing at it for a moment. Then he nodded.

"All right. I'll give it a shot." He said frankly. "But shit, if this burns my hand off, Chichiri…"

"I don't think it will, you know." Chichiri shook his head. "It doesn't have that kind of feel about it. This is your mountain, after all. A place you were drawn to as a kid, Tasuki — one you've always come back to, no matter what else you've done under Suzaku's sign. This place and your spirit are connected… maybe you've spent other lifetimes here, who really knows for sure? I don't think Suzaku will hurt you — but I think it does have to be you."

"Well, noone's sayin' I'm a chicken." Tasuki rolled his sleeves further up his arm, clapping his hands together a couple of times. "That should get the blood flowin' some — so let's see what happens."

"Aoi-kun, are you all right?" Hikari cast the soldier a sidelong

glance as Aoiketsu flinched, biting his lip.

“So long as I don’t see the blood, I think so.” He agreed.

“I thought the sword protected you from squeamishness?” Shishi looked surprised, and Aoiketsu gestured to Chichiri.

“He’s got it.” He said ruefully, and Chichiri offered him a sheepish smile.

“Then I’ll return it to you.” He said, holding it out. “I’m sorry, Aoi. I didn’t realise Hotohori’s spirit had such a strong influence over you.”

“I think… while it’s glowing like that, I’d rather not.” Aoiketsu shook his head. “I’ll be all right — I’ll just not watch, that’s all. I’m not Suzaku’s, and even though Hotohori-sama’s let me fight with his blade so far, in this place… I think it’s better off with someone he knows. After all, my Dad killed him — I don’t want him to decide to turn his magic on me.”

“You wuss.” Shishi snorted. “You’re a complete coward sometimes — you know that?”

“Well, the sooner I do this, the sooner he can quit bein’ a wimp an’ start bein’ useful again.” Tasuki said pragmatically. “Everyone ready? Here goes.”

He hesitated for a moment, then narrowed his gaze determinedly, thrusting his hand into the heart of the blazing fire. For a moment the flames flickered and seemed to glow more brightly, but despite the fact they licked up against Tasuki’s skin, the bandit did not flinch or cry out in pain, and Hikari’s eyes widened as she watched the Seishi push his hand deeper and deeper into the fire.

“I guess it’s not hot, then.” Myoume said wryly, and Tasuki shook his head.

“It sorta tickles, but it ain’t burnin’ me.” He agreed cheerfully. “An’ there’s somethin’ in here all right — feels like some kind of a box. I think I got a hold of it — dammit, Suzaku, you didn’t half want to make this difficult! Shit, it’s a good thing I’m determined!”

“A casket, maybe?” Hikari asked hopefully, and Tasuki nodded, standing up as he pulled his fingers from the fire.

“Looks it.” he agreed, dusting the stray ash and dust from his prize as he held out a gem-studded gold and red box, carved with the image of the phoenix across the top. “Well, Chichiri? Did I hit paydirt or what?”

“Well, whatever’s inside of that thing, it’s got powerful spiritual magic.” Chichiri agreed. “It feels like Suzaku’s magic, Tasuki. I think that’s it.”

“The thing isn’t even locked.” Tasuki continued, flipping the lid open casually as he set it down on the floor in front of the flames. “After all that, I guess Suzaku was lax on the security after all.”

“More likely your blood unsealed it as you brought it out.” Chichiri set the *shinken* down against the wall, kneeling down carefully beside the casket. He peered at the contents intently, then glanced up. “Yep, this is what we’re looking for. Suzaku’s feather — Hisei, the relic of the Phoenix. Tasuki, if you touch it with your blooded hand — maybe we’ll be able to speak to her.”

“Mmm.” Tasuki glanced at his hand, then he shook his head. Deftly he pulled his knife from his belt, offering his friend a smile as he held it out.

“This mage’s spirit depends on who raises her, right?” He said softly, and Chichiri looked startled, staring at him in confusion.

“Yes.” He agreed. “But you’re it’s guardian, so it’s meant to be you.”

“I think Suzaku’d want us to do this together.” Tasuki shook his head. “You an’ me, we make a good team. An’ if we add your blood an’ my blood to the mix, then surely we can’t mess this up — right? Our mage is gonna be woken properly — an’ we’ve come this far. What do you think? Are you up for it?”

Hikari cast the sorcerer a glance, seeing the flicker of understanding in the depths of his ruby gaze. Slowly he nodded, reaching out to take the proffered knife.

“I see what you mean.” He acknowledged, eying the blade for a moment, then drawing it neatly across his own left palm. “If that’s how you want it, I don’t have any objections. You’re right. We are a team — we’ve always been one. And Suzaku is our business… I guess it won’t hurt to show his mage our solidarity, will it?”

“My thoughts exactly.” Tasuki offered him a wolfish grin, tearing a strip of fabric from the hem of his shirt and wiping it across his still bleeding palm. He held it out to his companion who followed suit, then handed it back.

“You know, that’s really not hygenic.” Hikari murmured doubtfully. “Are you sure it’s okay, mixing your blood around like that…?”

“It’ll be all right.” Myoume assured her. “Don’t worry about it,

Hikari. Seishi blood is stronger when put together… Tasuki's right. We need Hisei to be strong — and to trust us right from the start."

"It was a good thought." Chichiri added, pulling a length of clean fabric from the folds of his clothing as he carefully and deftly bound his bleeding fist. "All right, Tasuki. Go for it, you know… I think it's time we heard the mage speak."

"Don't have to tell me twice." Tasuki assured him, dropping the bloodstained cloth down over the top of the feather with a flick of his fingers.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, just as Hikari was beginning to wonder if something had gone wrong, the flames at each corner of the chamber suddenly flared up towards the ceiling, glittering with a bright ethereal light as the whole of the red casket began to shimmer and vibrate. Instinctively the young girl took a step back as the entire chamber seemed to be engulfed in the spectral flame and then, just as quickly as it had come the fire was gone, and in its place hovered the misty,
translucent form of a young woman.

"H… Hisei?" Hikari whispered, and at the sound of her name, the figure turned, her gaze softening as she registered the young girl's appearance. Slowly she nodded, holding out her hands.

"Well, Suzaku no Shinzahou." She breathed, her words soft and gentle like the crackle of fire on wood. "So you have come."

Hikari swallowed hard, unable to respond as she took in the figure's unusual appearance. As though born of the fire itself, the apparition's flame red hair curled over her shoulders and down her back in wild, flame-like waves, and her eyes glittered with goldish bronze light which made Hikari gasp as she suddenly realised the similarity between Hisei's eyes and those both Tasuki and Shishi possessed. She was robed in reds and golds, in a direct contrast to Doryoku's more muted earth tones, and her aura glittered with amber light, making her seem even more otherworldly.

"Hisei-sama." Chichiri was the first to recover his composure, stepping forward and holding his own hands out towards hers as he offered her a smile. "We're sorry to disturb you, but we've come to ask for your help."

"I know this, Suzaku no Chichiri." Hisei put her head on one side, eying him pensively. "Your blood mingles through me, just as your companion's does. I feel your wishes and I understand your fears. I am bound by Suzaku to serve his people — and I will do my best to help."

“She looks like she’s family to Shishi and Tasuki.” Aoiketsu murmured. “Don’t you think so? She looks just like them… the hair and eyes and everything.”

Hisei’s gaze flitted towards the soldier, eying him carefully. Then she smiled, nodding her head.

“You are the one prophesied to come here.” She said, seeming pleased. “Seiryuu’s legacy — this is good to see. And you… Byakko no Toroki.” She reached out a finger to brush Myoume’s cheek, and Myoume let out an exclamation, flinching back.

“You knew we’d be here, too?” She demanded, and Hisei nodded.

“I was instructed by Suzaku to rest here until the time Suzaku called on me to help this world.” She agreed. “He told me it would be a time when all the lands would need to unite, and so they have.”

“Then you know what danger we face.” Chichiri said gravely. “And why we’ve come.”

“You seek to raise me from this place and use my powers of flame to support you in your quest East.” Hisei responded, and Chichiri nodded.

“That’s about the size of it.” He agreed. “We don’t know quite how, but with the power of the Shinzahou — it’s possible to do that, isn’t it?”

“It’s possible, yes.” Hisei agreed. “But regardless, it’s a path I cannot let you take.”

“You… can’t?” Dismay welled up in Hikari’s heart. “But… why not? Why won’t you help us? Surely if you’re strong… if you have Suzaku’s power… Kutou have two risen mages already, and we have Doryoku but it’s not the same, and…”

“Shh.” Hisei reached out a ghostly finger to touch Hikari’s lips, essentially stopping her in mid-sentence. “Hear my reasons, Suzaku no Shinzahou. Your power is required to raise me from this place — do you truly understand what that means?”

“Means?” Tasuki echoed. “She’s the magic, isn’t she? I mean, the key… the one who can raise you… right?”

“It would take a good deal of Suzaku’s power to raise me from this place.” Hisei shook her head regretfully. “The scars Tenkou left on me and my sister mages mean that we can only be fully revived with help. But if the magic was used to raise me…”

She faltered, eying Hikari sadly.

“Suzaku and Seiryuu long ago made a pact.” She said softly. “That the last land to be saved would be Seiryuu’s Kutou, but it would be the land whose Miko would save all things, not just the people of the East. Seiryuu understood that his land would be filled with danger and mistrust, and so he and Suzaku made this pact. You were chosen as Seiryuu no Miko before even your parents were born — I feel it in your spirit that you are the chosen Miko who Kutou’s Seishi should have been born to follow. And yet you have no Seishi to support you… you only have your own power. For this reason, Suzaku no Shinzahou, you have Suzaku’s own magic beating within your heart. And in order to raise Seiryuu — in order to succeed — you will need that power from within as well as the power from outside. My resurrection would compromise your strength… I cannot consent to that.”

“I see.” Chichiri bit his lip. “So in effect, to bring a mage to life means a Shinzahou no longer has the same power as it had before?”

“Whilst the mage draws strength from it, no.” Hisei agreed.

She turned, eying Shishi contemplatively.

“I feel my sister mage’s spirit within you.” She murmured. “If I may, I would like to speak with her, also — if you are able to raise her without compromising your own safety.”

“Do-nee?” Shishi looked startled, then she nodded. “I suppose so. I mean, Do-nee can come out on her own, without using me… she just can’t do it for long, that’s all. Doryoku, if you heard that — come out and speak to Hisei-sama a moment, huh?”

There was a glitter of silver light, and slowly Doryoku took form before them, the snow-flecked beads of her hair glittering in the flickering firelight.

“Hisei.” She whispered, and Hisei nodded, holding out her hand to brush against her sister’s.

“Are you committed to Suzaku’s cause now, Doryoku?” She asked softly, and Doryoku nodded.

“Shishi’s cause is my cause. Shishi and I are connected now, after all.” She agreed, and Hisei smiled.

“Then I have some advice I can give.” She said frankly, turning back to the group as a whole. “Whilst I cannot leave this place, or travel with you to Kutou, I can advise you and perhaps guide you in

the way that Suzaku would hope me to."

"Then get on with it already." Tasuki said bluntly. "Since we came all the way down here, and so far all you're doing is talking."

"Tasuki, shut up." Chichiri shot him a glance, and Tasuki shrugged.

"I didn't stick my hand in a fire to get a lecture on magic, or be part of a mage reunion party." He said frankly. "I want to know what we can do about it — I leave the theorising to you."

"He is impatient." Hisei looked amused. "Yes, he's Suzaku's fire spirit all right. The one who belongs on this mountain — it's a pleasure and an honour to finally meet you, Reikaku-zan no Genrou-sama. Even though you've been here many times before — at last we meet face to face."

"Many times…" Tasuki faltered, despite himself, and Chichiri grinned.

"Looks like your connection to this mountain *has* gone deeper than just this lifetime after all." He reflected. "Aoi's not wrong, though — Hisei does look like she's a part of your family. I suppose if Suzaku created your spirit to one day be Tasuki, he meant it to be that way all along."

"All of this has been planned since before any of us were even thought about." Myoume murmured. "Even before the last Toroki was protecting Sairou… even before that."

"And that means… I *am* Seiryuu no Miko?" Hikari added. "But… what about Yui-san? I mean, she came here…"

She faltered, and Hisei shook her head.

"Hongou Yui was brought here by Suzaku no Miko when Suzaku first called Yuuki Miaka to Kounan." She said matter-of-factly. "That accident meant she could cross the divide, and it tainted things irreversably. She became Miko, drawing the celestial spirits out of those who would be the Miko's protectors — but she was not strong enough to raise Seiryuu and save Kutou, nor was she able to unify her Celestial soldiers under one aim. Therefore she was not the true Miko. All of the others succeeded in these tasks. Okuda Takiko. Ousugi Suzuno. Yuuki Miaka. All of them brought peace. Hongou Yui did not. She was not the one who would. That one is *you*… and always has been. But Hongou Yui had to come here. She was part of strengthening your father's bond with your mother, Hikari. To fight against adversity is the quickest way to forge a connection, after all. And also, of course, to leave Kutou with a Shinzahou that one day a

stronger Seiryuu no Miko would be able to use."

She smiled.

"Hongou Yui did her part." She added softly. "Seiryuu placed his final hope in Suzaku no Shinzahou… and here you are. All is well in the end."

"All is well?" Aoiketsu demanded, anger flickering in his blue eyes. "You're saying Kutou suffered war and slavery and pain and death and all of that… and it wasn't even for a proper *reason*? That they were just being used so that the Gods could shift around the heavens and play games with them? All those people… people like Hyoushin-sama's family… and noone really came to save Kutou at all? All the people who placed hope in Hongou Yui-sama — and it was all a fraud?"

"The people of Kutou defined their own fate." Hisei shook her head. "The Gods are not to blame for everything. They are not the ones who make men turn on each other and slay those not of their kind. It was the nature of Kutou's people that meant till now they could not be saved. Till they reached out for help, not in conquest… till they had learnt that lesson, noone could save them. Until they had an Emperor who sought peace, not war — and people to uphold his hope… what could a Miko do? Even Seiryuu's chosen Seishi spirits were forced to life and twisted by the darkness that swamped that land. Your country are to blame for their own ills, soldier. Noone else."

Despite himself, Aoiketsu faltered, looking stricken, and Hikari reached over to squeeze his hand.

"We'll put it right, though. I'm going to be the Miko and I'm going to do it properly, remember?" She said softly.

"I'm glad you feel that way." Hisei offered her a smile. "It won't be easy to do, because Kutou still has dark elements that need to be overcome. And if you are correct and they have raised mages — those mages must be defeated before you can use the Shinzahou to raise Seiryuu over the Kutou skies. Still, you have a strong heart, Suzaku no Shinzahou. It's Suzaku's heart as well as your own, after all."

She spread her hands, sparks of ghostly flame sprinkling over the floor as she did so.

"I'm not Seiryuu's and I will not tell his Miko what wishes to make." She added. "But I believe in you — that if you follow your heart, you'll know what it is you need to do."

"But if we defeat mages… what about Do-nee? Will we have to

suppress her, too?" Shishi asked, and Hisei looked surprised.

"Doryoku?" She echoed, and Shishi nodded.

"Because she's risen, sort of, isn't she?" She replied. "And I promised her I wouldn't abandon her… so…"

"I'm not risen from a Shinzahou, Shishi." Doryoku's eyes softened and she shook her head. "So it isn't the same thing at all. And I'll keep my promise to help you."

"You'll need that help." Hisei admitted. "Seiryuu no Miko, Doryoku is not a fighting spirit. But do not take her lightly. You will need her protection and her strength to succeed in your task — of this I have no doubt."

Hikari cast Shishi a glance, and Shishi shrugged.

"I'll be with you." She said frankly. "And Do-nee and I are sort of a package deal, so that goes without saying, doesn't it?"

"I think I'm going to need all the help I can get." Hikari admitted, and Doryoku inclined her head slightly in the schoolgirl's direction.

"Shishi's cause is mine, now. In Hisei's place, I'll do my best to help you." She promised. "If there's any way I can, I will."

"This is about all four lands, after all." Hisei agreed. "Suzaku, Genbu, Seiryuu, Byakko — this involves all of them, and whatever help we can give them."

"If we have to fight Suiko and Kitora, it's going to be tricky." Aoiketsu murmured. "Suiko alone is a handful for anyone, but the both of them together…"

"Fight Suiko…" Myoume echoed, a strange expression crossing her face, and Hikari frowned, shooting her a confused glance.

"Myoume?" She murmured. "Is something wrong?"

"Fighting…" Myoume's eyes widened, and she shook her head, fear flickering in the depths of her indigo gaze as she took a step or two back towards the entrance to the chamber.

"It's now." She whispered. "It's now, when we're here, and why didn't I…"

She faltered, wheeling on Aoiketsu and grabbing him by the shoulders.

"Why didn't you tell me Kayu was in Kounan?" She demanded, urgency and anger in her tones. "Why didn't you tell me before we

came in, Aoi? Why not?"

"I didn't know until we fought those people on the mountain." Aoiketsu started, staring at her as if she was mad. "But he wasn't with those men — and Suzaku's Shinzahou is here with us, isn't she? So is Hisei — why? What are you talking about — what's wrong?"

"The prophesy… the things I saw…" Myoume swallowed hard, and for a moment Hikari thought her friend might faint. Then she seemed to get a faint grip on her composure, shaking her head as if to clear it.

"I have to go." She muttered thickly. "I have to… even though it's probably too late… I have to go. Byakko have mercy on them, I have to…"

She pushed Aoiketsu aside, hurrying out of the chamber, and Hikari stared after her, confusion in her hazel eyes.

"What was that about?" She demanded. "Prophesy? What does she mean? What's going on?"

"Who is this Kayu, anyway?" Shishi added. "Did we meet him already? Or is he just another Kutou soldier who's been lurking around the place?"

"Hikari's met him." Aoiketsu said with a frown. "When I first came here, he came to Chichiri's place to check up on me. He pretended to need an apothecary — Hikari and I were there. But… if he's come back, he must have come to find Hikari. And she's here, so…"

Hikari bit her lip.

"*That* was Kayu?" She demanded, and Aoiketsu nodded.

"Yes." He agreed.

"Then he knows what I look like?"

"Yes, but I haven't told him you're the Shinzahou, so he can't possibly know that. And like I said — he hasn't come here."

"No, he hasn't." Chichiri's gaze became grave. "Aoi-kun, remind me again of what it was Maichu said regarding Toroki's prediction in the cave in Sairou? We've focused a lot on Hyoushin's involvement or otherwise — but what about… the rest of it? Did Maichu tell you any more than that?"

"Maichu?" Aoiketsu's expression underwent a transformation, then, "Shit! Is that what she means? She said something would happen to Maichu if he was in Kounan… is this what she was talking about? Something to do with Kayu — something to do with…"

He trailed off.

“I have to go after her.” He murmured. “If Kayu was involved in seeing off the Commander, and he thinks Hyoushin-sama’s some kind of traitor… If he finds him like this, God knows what might happen.”

“Aoi!” Hikari reached out a hand to stop him, but Aoiketsu shook his head, brushing her off.

“I can’t, Hikari.” He said softly. “These are my friends… I *have* to get involved.”

With that he was gone, and Hikari bit her lip, anxiety glittering in her expression.

“What on earth did Myoume see?” She whispered. “What freaked her out like that… and Aoi too — what’s going to happen?”

“Whatever it is, Aoi went without a weapon.” Chichiri glanced down at the *shinken* which still rested against the shrine wall, then scooped it up in his hands. “We should head after him, before he gets entangled in something he shouldn’t be. Tasuki, can we leave sealing this place to you and Shishi? It’s your mountain after all — and I think the sooner I catch up to Myoume and Aoi the better.”

“No problem.” Tasuki’s expression became one of comprehension. “Leave it to us — go play referee with the kids… if there’s goin’ to be trouble I’d rather the cub was kept out of it for the time bein’…an’ besides, I have some prisoners to play with as it is.”

“Do you think… there’ll be a fight?” Shishi asked anxiously, and Chichiri frowned. Slowly he nodded his head.

“I do.” He agreed gravely. “Which is why I can’t waste any time in catching the both of them up.”

Well, there was no mistaking Maichu’s endeavour.

Hyoushin sat back against the tree trunk with a resigned sigh as his young compatriot disappeared into the woodland, sword already in his hand as he hurried off to find the best laden branches. Somehow, despite the awkwardness of their situation and the fragility of his physical health, he felt reassured by Maichu’s characteristic impulsiveness. The boy did not have Aoiketsu’s academic skill, he reflected pensively. And yet, as he had observed to Chichiri, the heart of a loyal soldier beat in his young chest, and it comforted the Meihi to know it.

“He brought me my sword at the risk of his own life, and he’s continued to stick by me regardless of what it may mean for him if we fail.” He murmured. “If I had been killed by Miramu, he and Aoiketsu would have been alone in this strange land… or at least, so far as we knew, when we arrived here. That we have Suzaku’s aid is reassuring… but unexpected. He can’t have known it would have been this way before he made his choice to come.”

He glanced down at his injured arm, gingerly running his right hand over his bared skin as he felt the faint prickles and twinges of pain that greeted his touch. It was almost as though something had scalded through his limb, he realised, for even though he could barely move it, it was tender to the touch and with a sigh he drew his other hand back.

“Perhaps it will not recover… certainly not in time for us to travel.” He admitted to himself. “I may never hold a sword again. It may even be better to remove the limb altogether, if it continues to be such a hindrance to me… although such drastic surgery is something I don’t relish particularly. Besides, I already lost enough blood yesterday morning… Miramu’s arsenal carries many different threats.”

He frowned, his eyes narrowing as he remembered Chichiri’s casual account of his rescue.

“Aoiketsu helped to stop me bleeding to death.” He recalled. “The man who has never been able to face blood managed to stem his fears long enough to help me. Is that a sign of his loyalty to me, or something else? I wish I knew… I sense a change in the boy, and yet… I don’t understand yet what it is. Perhaps it’s knowing that young girl — they say that encountering a Miko changes one forever, after all. I suppose time will tell, in the end.”

The rustle of branches jerked him from his reverie and he glanced up, expecting to see his young companion, his arms laden with fruit. As his gaze fell on the other person, however, his eyes widened with a mixture of disbelief and consternation. Across the clearing, the intruder was similarly struck, his expression one of shock and dismay as he registered the stricken Meihi before him.

For a moment, nothing in the grove moved. Then, at length, Hyoushin found his voice.

“Kayu.” He whispered, and at the sound of his name, the young soldier seemed to spark back to life, resolution hardening in his dark eyes as his fingers strayed to his belt.

“Hyoushin-sama.” He murmured, then, “I was told you were dead.”

“You were told wrongly, it seems.” Hyoushin kept his tones level, though inwardly his thoughts were racing. His gaze fell on his left hand, and a flicker of panic surged through him as he realised he would not easily wield his blade in his own defence. Yet somehow he managed to keep this out of his voice as he faced his former subordinate impassively.

“I apologise for the inconvenience.”

Kayu’s brow creased, and Hyoushin could tell he was fighting something out with himself. Then, at length he sighed, pulling his weapon and holding it aloft as he took a couple of steps forward.

“I’m sorry, sir.” He said softly. “But you… I can’t… the Emperor has decreed…”

“Kintsusei-sama has decreed what, exactly, Kayu?” Hyoushin made one final attempt to shift his left hand in the direction of his blade, but instead a stab of pain shot through his damaged nerves and it was all he could do not to cry out. “Explain yourself.”

“I don’t have to explain myself to you.” Kayu said firmly, although there was a flicker of doubt in his dark eyes. “You’re an enemy of Kutou. A traitor. An exile. And an outlaw. Kintsusei-sama has ordered for you to be killed. He sent men to finish the job. If they have failed, then I… I must…”

“You must do their duty in their place?” Hyoushin asked softly, and Kayu flinched. For a moment he hesitated, then he nodded his head.

“I must.” He said quietly. “Kikei-sama explained to me everything… and I have no choice. I have to sever your influence over my comrades and I have to help the Emperor bring peace to Kutou. You are now his enemy, Hyoushin-sama. It’s not something I can ignore. I’ve been sent to retrieve Aoiketsu and Maichu from your clutches — and to carry out Kintsusei-sama’s bidding. If you’re here… it complicates things.”

“I see.” Hyoushin pulled himself to his knees, glancing at his right hand briefly before reaching it out to grasp the hilt of his sword. It felt odd and foreign between his fingers, and as he used it to force himself to his feet, Kayu let out an exclamation, seeming to realise for the first time his former Commander’s physical condition.

“So the assassins *did* find you.” He murmured. “Yet you escaped them somehow?”

“I am not an easy man to kill, Hei Kayu.” Hyoushin said quietly, his amethyst eyes clouding as he weighed his chances of disarming and incapacitating the young soldier before Maichu’s return. With the help

of his young comrade, he knew that subduing and imprisoning the man would be easy — but from the look of determination that now burned in Kayu's eyes, getting to that point would be no easy matter.

"Even so, you're not strong enough to fight me, are you?" He observed now, swinging his blade briefly as if to illustrate his point. "You can't take your weapon in your left hand — you're injured somehow, and you can't come at me like you normally would. Can you?"

"That does not mean I am not willing to fight for my life." Hyoushin said softly. "In my Emperor's name, Kayu, there is very little I would not do."

"In your Emperor's name." Kayu snorted, a flicker of anger stirring in the depths of his gaze. "You've been condemned as a traitor, yet you still say those things?"

"I am not a traitor to anyone." Hyoushin forced himself to stand erect, his grip on his blade tightening. "If I die with that ideal in my mind, I will not be dying without purpose. I am not blinded by loyalty like you are, it seems. Or did you not know, Kayu, that I am not the *only* tribesman who serves your King?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Kayu said flatly, and Hyoushin shook his head.

"What did I tell you in Hokkan?" He asked quietly. "So long as you follow your Emperor's order, all will be well — yes? That nothing would inspire you to betray him?"

"Yes." Kayu's words were stiff. "I remember. And now look at where we are."

"Indeed we are." Hyoushin agreed gravely, inwardly cursing how dizzy and unsteady he felt now he was on his feet. "I don't believe you would betray him, either. Not intentionally. And yet, if you slay me, you will be a step closer to doing so."

"Do you think he values your life so much, then?" Kayu demanded angrily. "The Emperor has ordered…"

"The Emperor, or Lord Kikei?" Hyoushin cut across him, and Kayu's eyes narrowed.

"Don't speak so about a man who serves the King properly." He snapped. "Not when you've committed the crimes you have. Here you are, in the heart of Suzaku's territory. You cannot pretend to me that you have not colluded with Kounan's people. They are not our allies,

Hyoushin-sama! Yet you're in their midst — you are a traitor — proven by your own actions! You cannot lecture me or call into question my superiors! Kikei-sama has done nothing to harm the Emperor, and you should not speak like that to me about him!"

"Kikei-sama was born a member of the Hin tribe." Hyoushin said bluntly, and Kayu's eyes widened for a moment, then he frowned, shaking his head.

"I don't have to listen to your slanders." He said firmly, raising his blade as he shifted into a more combative stance. "And in any case, such things aren't important. There is only *one* tribal traitor to his Highness and that is*you*… Kikei-sama's heritage has nothing to do with it. You're trying to make me doubt in the man who has given me everything since the day I was orphaned and I won't be so easily swayed. I do the Emperor's bidding — and he has ordered your death. Your own words have only cemented my resolve. If the assassins can't do their duty, then in Kintsusei-sama's name, *I will*!"

Chapter 19

Chapter Eighteen

For a moment, nothing seemed to move in the forest clearing, as Commander and soldier faced one another in grim silence. As he surveyed Kayu's determination, Hyoushin felt a flicker of anxiety stir inside of his heart and he tightened his grip on his weapon, inwardly cursing the fact that he had never learnt to properly fight with his right arm.

"As all men do, I rely on the things which I am most used to." He berated himself, shifting his stance to steady himself against the dizzy rush that threatened to overwhelm his still fevered senses. "Yet in the end, such judgements can mean life or death. I should have striven harder… at least to disarm the boy. He is one I have trained, and I know his strengths and his weaknesses… but because he is one I have trained, I know he will not be easy to overcome. Has the poison been purged from my system only for me to succumb at the hands of one of my own men?"

Myoume's prophesy flickered across his thoughts at that moment and he frowned, brows knitting together as he considered them more carefully.

"One of you will lie dead, slain by one considered a brother or a friend." He murmured softly, and at the sound of his words, Kayu started, staring at him as if seeing him anew.

"Why do you quote that witch's words at me?" He demanded. "Do you think that, considering what you've done, I should see you in either light? You're not the Commander I thought you were… not the man I trusted and looked up to. You may have trained me, but you have become my enemy — not my friend."

"I will ask you one more time, Kayu." Hyoushin swallowed hard, as his vision wobbled and flickered in and out of focus. "To fight is not in either of our interests, and this deed is one you will regret. Submit your sword and let us talk… or did I not train you that fighting a wounded man was a dishonourable act?"

Kayu's eyes darkened, and he shook his head.

"In the Emperor's name, sometimes things have to be distasteful." He said softly, a dangerous edge to his tones. "Killing a wounded man

is a sin against honour, perhaps. But killing a traitor, injured or not — that is forgivable. If it's in Kintsusei-heika's name, all is forgivable."

Before Hyoushin could react, the young man had darted forward, the blade glittering in the bright sunlight as he drove it towards his former Commander's throat, and more by instinct than anything else Hyoushin managed to parry the blow, gasping as pain shuddered through out his whole body at the impact. He stumbled slightly, only just managing to regain his footing as he focused his energy on pushing Kayu away. He was weak, he realised, weaker than even he had known, and there was no way he could survive this confrontation more than a few minutes if it continued in this vein.

He narrowed his eyes, gathering as much strength as he could as he pushed against Kayu's brightly polished weapon, somehow managing to break their contact as the youngster rallied for a second attempt. Kayu's eyes burned with purpose and determination, and Hyoushin knew that there would be no talking him around.

"This fight ends with death." He murmured in his native tongue, unconsciously slipping back into Meihi habits as he struggled to ready himself for the next attack. "And I am at a severe disadvantage."

"Don't think your tribal incantations can work on me!" Kayu exclaimed, anger in his gaze as he raised his sword a second time, darting forward to cast another sharp, resolute blow in his Commander's direction. As he did so, Hyoushin felt the world twist and sway around him, and he swallowed hard, afraid that he might be consumed by dizzyness or nausea as blackness touched the edges of his vision. He stumbled back, using his sword to steady him as he closed his eyes, half-waiting for the inevitable feel of Kayu's blade against his skin.

Instead of sharp pain, however, from somewhere in the disjointed darkness of Hyoushin's awareness there was a loud yell, followed by the clattering clash of metal on metal, and as the Meihi opened his eyes, he let out a gasp of surprise. In the gap between his weapon and Kayu's, a fresh figure had entered into the conflict, sword drawn as he fought to push his companion back.

"What the hell are you doing, you ape!" He exclaimed, casting the attacker a reproachful glare. "Have you gone crazy?"

"Maichu!" Kayu faltered for a moment, then lowered his blade, his gaze darting from the wounded Meihi to his former comrade. He frowned, shaking his head.

"So you *are* here." He murmured. "And you ask me what *I'm* doing?

What about you? Running south — stealing that man's sword from Imperial custody… those things amount to treason, you know! Hyoushin-sama is an exiled outlaw to Kutou — why are you stepping between us? You know as well as I do what protecting a traitor means!"

"I'm *not* protecting a traitor." Maichu retorted. "I'm protecting the man who trained me. Who trained *you*, too. You must be an idiot, if you think he'd betray anyone. You should know better than that!"

Kayu frowned, tapping his weapon agitatedly against the ground as he surveyed the two men. At the sudden uncertainty, Hyoushin spied his chance to interfere and he gathered his wits, inwardly thanking his lucky stars for Maichu's opportune timing. He stepped forward, using his own weapon to support his shaking body then reaching out to place his right hand on Kayu's shoulder.

"I have not betrayed the Emperor." He said softly. "Things are not always as clear as they seem, Kayu."

"Don't touch me." Kayu shook the touch away, glaring at the Meihi in anger. "It doesn't matter what you say — I'm not as easily fooled as Maichu is, and I won't be taken in. You're in Kounan, and you came here on purpose… you can't pretend that's not treason."

He glanced at Maichu, an imploring look in his gaze.

"Why can't you see that?" He demanded. "Kintsusei-sama dispatched me here to find you and Aoi, and bring you home. Don't you realise that if you oppose me, it'll be death for you? I don't want that, you idiot — you're my friend, even if you are stupid. That's why I came… I want to bring you home while there's still a chance of sorting this whole mess out!"

Maichu tensed at this, his grip tightening on his sword, and as he saw the emotion flickering in the youngster's gaze, Hyoushin's own amethyst eyes widened with alarm.

"Toroki's prophesy…" He whispered, shaking his head. "Maichu… you should go with Kayu. Do as he says. Do not let me be the cause of your disgrace. I told you, I would not stand by and let you be so hurt… you would do better to do as your friend says, and leave this place entirely."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Maichu gazed at him in confusion. "Is that snake drug giving you hallucinations again, sir? Because you already know I'm not going anywhere. This is where I belong — for the Emperor's sake as well as yours. Do you think I'm

going to turn my back on you just like that? I'm not the idiot — I'm not the one who's been duped. And I don't turn my back on those I trust so damn easily!"

"Then what do you intend to do, Maichu?" Kayu cast him a quizzical look. "Exile yourself and hide from the Emperor's justice? For the sake of one man who has betrayed his own teachings by acting thus?"

"You're really not as smart as you think you are, if you don't realise that what you just said makes no sense." Maichu's brows knitted together in annoyance. "Listen to yourself, Kayu. You and I were both taught values by Hyoushin-sama — values of honour and loyalty and when to fight and when not to. So why would you think that he would go against the things he instilled into us himself? There's no logic in it at all."

"You really aren't going to change your mind, are you?" Kayu murmured, and Maichu snorted, shaking his head.

"No, so you might as well do." He agreed frankly. "Either way, the Commander's hurt and there's no strength in fighting a wounded man. I can't believe that one of our regiment would even think of slaying someone who couldn't defend themselves at least a little… can't you see with those stupid eyes of yours that he can barely stand? What kind of fair fight would that be?"

"Fair fights against traitors aren't necessary." Kayu said flatly, and Maichu's eyes widened in disbelief.

"Shit." He murmured. "You're friggin' serious, aren't you? If I hadn't intervened… you would really have run him through, sick or not? Shit, Kayu — what the hell kind of soldier are you? What has that fat old priest told you, to turn you into such a coward?"

"I'm *not* a coward!" This sparked Kayu's temper and he shook his head, drawing his blade up as if to support his point. "And you shouldn't talk like that about my patron!"

"Why not?" Maichu frowned, readying his own sword, and Hyoushin's heart leapt in his chest as he registered the changing stances of the two men, realising that they were both intuitively preparing for conflict. "*He's* the one doing all of this — sending people to kill the Commander just because he's a Meihi. If that's a crime now, we're fightin' for different Kutous. An' yes, I did take the sword, and yes, I did come South, of my own free will. But Suiko asked me to, too. She told me that your fat old Priest was a dirty piece of work and that Hyoushin needed help. So it's not just my delusion. It's Seiryuu's

mage's, too."

"Suiko is a mad spell-caster with a crush on the Commander. She talks nonsense most of the time." Kayu snapped. "Who knows whose side she's really fighting on?"

"Seiryuu's, no doubt." Hyoushin said gravely, making up his mind as he forced his heavy body between the two men. "This stops now. I won't have you two act like this… lower your blades, both of you. If Kayu has things to ask me, let him ask them. I will not advocate blood being spilt — on any account."

"Stop saying things like that!" This seemed to upset Kayu further, for his eyes narrowed and he flexed his weapon in Hyoushin's direction. "I'm going to kill you, whether Maichu likes it or not. I know my duty… my duty to the Emperor who sent me here… and I'll make sure I carry it out!"

He swung his sword in Hyoushin's direction, and the Meihi only just managed to counter it with his own heavy blade, the force of the contact sending him tumbling to the ground with a heavy thud. The impact jarred up his injured arm and he let out a cry of pain, his composure momentarily shattered by the sudden shock against his senses. Kayu stepped forward, holding his weapon towards Hyoushin's throat, but before he could plunge it through his former Commander's jugular, Maichu had once more forced his own sword between them, pushing Kayu's back.

"If you want to kill the Commander, you have to go through me." He said thickly, some of his usual light spirit gone from his tones as he faced his comrade with a steely, black glare. "I told you. I am not going to let you do something so damn stupid. I fight for my Emperor and for my Commander. And unlike you, I don't think they're at crossed purposes. If you knew half the things we do, you'd understand — but you're so thick-skulled you're not going to listen to anything I say, are you? So if my sword is the only thing you'll pay attention to, lets talk with blades instead."

"Maichu, no!" Hyoushin exclaimed, reaching out to try and pull his young companion back, but even this faint gesture caused jolts of pain to rocket through his injured left side, sending his vision swirling towards blackness as he battled to stay conscious. At the sight of his Commander's struggling, Maichu's expression seemed to become even more resolute, and he shook his head.

"You said it yourself, sir." He said quietly. "That because I made this choice, it meant Kayu and I would be enemies now. So if that's

how it is… I'm going to beat him and send him running back to his pompous fat master with his tail between his legs. I'm not going to let anything happen to you — do you think Aoi would forgive me if I did? I told them I'd take care of you — and dammit, I *will*!"

"Aoi?" Kayu's black eyes glittered with anger. "So he *is* involved in this conspiracy as well? I should have known he wouldn't be able to break his childhood loyalties so easily!"

"The same could be said about *you*." Maichu said bluntly, pushing his weapon against Kayu's as he readied himself for a proper exchange of blows. "You're doing as Kikei says because he was soft on you once upon a time. You're his puppet, Kayu, and it's sickening."

"I'm not the one who's sickening!" Kayu exclaimed, bringing his sword down hard, and Maichu deftly parried the blow, darting to the side as he launched another attack of his own. This Kayu met with equal strength, and as Hyoushin sank back against the tree, he felt his misgivings grow inside of him as he realised how little there was to choose between the two men.

"Both taught by me, and yet…" He murmured, loosing his weapon as he reached over to rub his aching left arm. "Oh, damn this arm! Damn Miramu's deeds..I cannot even stand up, let alone meaningfully interfere. It would have been better had you not come, Maichu — if Kayu had killed me, so be it… but this fight between you…"

He closed his eyes, Toroki's words echoing once more in his head.

"This is what she meant." He whispered. "The friend against the friend… the fight from which only one will walk away. What have I done, bringing you here, Maichu? What fate have I condemned you to?"

Across the grass, the clatter of blade on blade resounded once more through the trees as Kayu forced his companion up against the broad wooden trunk of the willow that only a short time before Hyoushin had been resting under so peacefully. For a moment it seemed that the older soldier had made his extra years count, but determination flashed in Maichu's dark eyes and he pushed his opponant away, jumping aside as he readied himself for the next attack.

"You're just as much the spider as ever." Kayu observed coolly, and Maichu snorted.

"I don't need to be the spider to escape your attacks, Hei Kayu." He snapped back. "You're not as good a fighter as I am, and you're going to see what I mean. I don't have any intention of running away from a

coward and a traitor, after all. Not when so much is at stake."

"I'm not the coward or the traitor!" Kayu exclaimed. "You should open your eyes!"

"You should shut your mouth." Maichu retorted smartly. "If you're not going to talk sense, don't talk at all. If you're so strong, damn well prove it with your sword. Because I mean it, you know. If you want to hurt the Commander, you're damn well going to have to get me out of the way first!"

"It can be arranged." Kayu snapped back, as the blades clashed together once again, and inwardly Hyoushin winced at the coldness in the young soldier's tones. "Just don't regret it, when I slit your throat in the Emperor's name."

"I'm too late."

A murmur at the Meihi's right hand made him turn, meeting the troubled indigo gaze of the prophet as she sank down beside him on the grass, resting her hand gently on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Hyoushin… I should have… sooner, I should have known…"

She faltered, and Hyoushin frowned, eying her beseechingly.

"Stop them." He begged. "Stop the fight, Myoume… before one of them kills the other."

"I can't." Myoume murmured, and Hyoushin's gaze narrowed as he absorbed her words.

"Can't? Or won't?" He demanded, and Myoume shook her head helplessly.

"Can't. Won't. What's the difference?" She said helplessly. "This fight has already begun. I can't change it any more than I can change the past. If I was to interfere, you might be hurt. I might be hurt. All kinds of things may happen… besides, it has already gone too far. To come between those blades… don't you feel it? This is a fight that noone can stop. Not even me."

"And that's your final answer?" Hyoushin stared at her incredulously, disbelief in his amethyst eyes. "You'll just let them… Myoume, this was your prophesy, wasn't it? What you said to us in the cave in Sairou — that one would lie dead at the hands of another. Isn't it?"

"Yes." Myoume agreed unhappily. "Yes, it is. But until just now I didn't know that Kayu was here… and that the time… was now. Until this moment, Hyoushin, I didn't know what was going to happen."

“But now you do…” Hyoushin faltered, then, “Myoume, they’re young men with lives still to live. Will you not at least preserve that?”

“I told you. There’s nothing I can do.” Myoume shook her head.

“Not even with all the power Byakko gave you?”

“My power is not so convenient as you think.” Myoume said bitterly. “I *told* you. I can’t do anything. To interfere in someone’s thoughts in the way I did with you, I need to make contact with them… and to not have them resist me. The only way I could use my power now would be to cause them to hallucinate — delusions which would definitely distress the two of them and more than likely result in the death of both, not just one. I have no other course of action — I cannot prevent the fight now it’s begun. I can’t use a sword… and my Byakko power is useless.”

“I see.” Hyoushin’s eyes clouded as he absorbed this. Then he nodded, reaching out to grab his own sword once more. “Then I must… somehow, I must find the strength to…”

He tightened his grip, pushing the blade against the ground as he struggled to his feet, but as he did, a wave of dizziness and pain overwhelmed him and he let out a gasp, stumbling back. Myoume reached out to steady his fall, pulling him back against the tree as she wrapped her arms firmly around him.

“*You* I can save.” She whispered. “So I will. There’s nothing you can do in this condition except open yourself up for death. I told you… it has already begun. Neither one of us can change the outcome… it’s already written in the stars.”

“Dammit, let me go!” Hyoushin struggled against her grip, his usual impassiveness nowhere to be seen in his desperation to prevent tragedy, but Myoume held him firm, and with a groan he realised that his own weakened state made his attempts futile.

“It’ll soon be over.” She murmured, a slight catch in her voice, and as he glanced at her, he saw tears glittering in her indigo eyes. “I’m truly sorry for it, Hyoushin… I am just the one who sees. I cannot change those things… I don’t have that power. Only Hikari has any power to change the future of this world… and this is a future that even she can’t avert.”

The weapons clattered against each other once again, and as he turned his gaze back to the conflict, Hyoushin could tell that both men were tiring from the force and speed of their battle. Sweat beaded their brows, as Kounan’s unforgiving climate also took its toll, yet

neither one of them showed any sign of faltering as they drove forward time and time again, clashing metal against metal as they struggled to break one another down.

“This is what they were trained to do, wasn’t it?” Myoume murmured softly. “To fight for what they believe is right.”

“Yes.” Hyoushin said bitterly. “But not against one another. I will not have blood shed over me, Myoume… let me go. Let me intervene — I am not worth such a sacrifice on either part!”

“You underestimate yourself.” Myoume shook her head. “You’re much more important than you realise. Your life is as valuable as anyone else’s… besides, Maichu is fighting to defend you, isn’t he? His honour and his skill are coming to the fore to protect the man he trusts in. He thinks you’re important. And so do I. He’s not fighting in vain — he’s fighting for something that matters to him.”

“But if it costs him his life, then…” Hyoushin faltered, and Myoume shook her head, putting a finger to his lips.

“It ends now.” She murmured. “I can feel others coming — Chichiri, Aoi… they are coming this way. It must end now… or not at all.”

Almost as soon as the words had left her mouth, Hyoushin saw the blinding glint of steel sweep across before them, a resolute cry filling the air as the two men collided for the last time. This time, one of the blades met its mark, piercing through the torso of the enemy as blood spattered across the ground below. Surprise glittered in the stricken man’s eyes as he stumbled, falling back against the hard earth with barely more than a whimper. As he hit the ground, blood began to pool around his motionless form, and even from where they were sitting, Hyoushin could see the glitter of his dark eyes becoming glassy and opaque as life and spirit ebbed out of him.

Above him, breathing heavily and still holding his dripping weapon, the victor stared down at his opponent, a mixture of emotions flooding his gaze as he struggled to ratify what he had done.

For a moment, an eerie stillness fell over the forest, as nothing seemed to move.

Then, from the furthest corner of the clearing came a yell.

“Maichu! Kayu!”

Aoiketsu darted across the grass, and at the sound, the swordsman glanced up, a stricken look in his dark eyes as he met his friend’s gaze.

He drew a shaky breath into his lungs, glancing at his blood-soaked weapon, then tossing it aside as if it had bitten him. He dropped to the ground beside the still form of his opponent, reaching frantically for a pulse, and Hyoushin's heart clenched as he registered the genuine distress in the young man's eyes.

"Maichu." Aoiketsu faltered, biting his lip. "Shit… what have you…"

At his words, Maichu seemed to stir from his daze, swallowing as he met Aoiketsu's gaze a second time. Slowly he shook his head.

"I didn't… he… I was…" He faltered. His gaze drifted across the clearing, registering Myoume's presence for the first time, and his eyes clouded as slowly he got to his feet.

"This is what you meant, isn't it?" He demanded softly, all usual fight and spirit gone from his tones as he faced her, anguish in his gaze. "One slain by a friend or a brother. Byakko have mercy. This was it… wasn't it? The terrible thing that would happen to me if I stayed in Kounan. Even then you knew, dammit… you knew that I was going to kill Kayu."

"I didn't know that for sure." Myoume shook her head slowly, tears glittering on her own cheeks. "Until now I didn't know what that prophesy meant, Maichu. I'm sorry… I wish I had been able to tell you beforehand. But I'm useless, it seems… I can't prevent any of the things I see at all."

Maichu's gaze rested on Kayu's cooling form once more, and Hyoushin half wondered if the boy might be sick.

"Myoume, let me go." He murmured, and without a word, Myoume released her grasp, helping the injured man to get to his feet. He took a step or two forward, but Maichu held up his hands, shaking his head.

"Don't." He murmured. "I can't… what I've done is… something unforgivable. Nothing you say… I can't be forgiven for this. Not when… he was my goddamn friend."

"Don't be stupid." Myoume said frankly. "You fought to defend your Commander… Maichu, you have to understand…"

"You don't get it." Maichu cut across her, shaking his head. "Coming back here, I knew, your prophesy… that I might die. But that was okay — for the Emperor, I was willing to do that. If it had to happen, so be it. But… but… I wasn't prepared for…"

He swallowed again.

“It would have been better had he killed me.” He whispered. “There’s nothing that could have been worse than this.”

With that he turned on his heel, disappearing into the forest, and Aoiketsu let out an exclamation, darting in the same direction.

“Maichu, wait! Come back here, dammit… *wait*!”

“Let him go, Aoi.” Myoume held up her hands, shaking her head. “He needs… to come to terms… with it on his own.”

“But…” Aoiketsu cast her a glare. “Shit, don’t you see how much this has hurt him? Maichu’s straight down the line, dammit — to betray a friend is the worst thing he could ever do!”

“Kayu betrayed him first.” Myoume said softly. “Maichu fought to defend Hyoushin’s life, Aoi. He’s done nothing wrong.”

“*He* doesn’t see it that way.” Aoiketsu said darkly, and Hyoushin stared at him, momentarily taken aback by the glitter of something cold and hard in his seiran eyes.

“Kayu wasn’t an enemy.” He continued, dropping down at the corpse’s side as he rested his hand on Kayu’s chest, seemingly oblivious to the spreading pool of blood that soaked the ground around him. “He was a puppet… nothing else. Maichu knows that, too. And this… dammit, I’ve had enough of this! It’s going to stop… it’s *got* to stop!”

“Aoi-kun…” Myoume began, but Aoiketsu shook his head, blue fire burning in his gaze as he faced her angrily.

“Kayu was my friend. Maichu’s friend.” He said darkly. “All of this… this is Kikei’s doing. First he exiles the Commander, then he sends Kayu here to do something like this. The men on the mountain, too — all of this is his doing. This is Kikei’s fault, and damn it, I’m not going to let it go lightly. To hurt Maichu like this… to sacrifice Kayu like this… those things are the truly unforgivable things. And I am *going to make him pay*!”

“So, what news from the South, Kikei?”

As the Priest made his way slowly into the imperial chamber, Kintsusei got up from his desk, a mixture of anxiety and apprehension in his clever gaze. “I haven’t heard anything much at all since the soldiers were dispatched South because of the business of resolving

the new Provincial Guard — but I will hear it now, if I may — your protege's progress on the mission to recover our lost strays… and Suzaku's treasure, too."

"There isn't much to report, sire." Kikei bowed his head, raising his beady black eyes to meet his Emperor's own. "I heard from Kayu yesterday to say that they'd arrived in the South West. Since then I've had no communication with him… but then, I don't expect him to contact me at every passing event. It would draw attention to him, after all — and he's an intelligent boy. I'm sure he'll find Aoiketsu and Maichu — and without doubt bring Sukunami Hikari to the East."

"Good." Kintsusei sighed, rubbing his temples. "At least something will come out of all this. I have barely slept since you brought me the news of Hyoushin's fate… tell me, did Kayu mention anything about those responsible? I meant what I said — I want his death avenged, and I want the culprits strung up on the gates of Kutou's capital before the summer is out."

"Heika, you have to think more rationally." Kikei cautioned, shaking his head. "That could be tantamount to a declaration of war, when from the evidence we have, Hyoushin was a traitor himself… do you want to play directly into the hands of the Phoenix's people?"

"No." Kintsusei shook his head, his dark eyes hardening once more. "I want justice for a friend, Kikei. I have yet to see this evidence of yours of Hyoushin's disloyalty to me. Toroki's prophesy is the word of a Byakko witch and one who has never even graced this court… I need something more tangible before I will accept that he turned against me. Even if I cannot bring him back to life to answer my questions — I will have justice for him, and I will clear his name of wrong-doing."

"An admirable sentiment, Kintsusei-sama."

Miramu's voice echoed from the darkness, making both Priest and Emperor jump as the assassin leapt neatly down from the roof beams, offering them a faint smile at their surprise. "I suppose I should choose better places to take my naps, shouldn't I — am I interrupting something?"

"Why are you in my private study?" Kintsusei cast the Westerner a wary look. "Of all places, Miramu, surely there are better places to sleep!"

"I'm not exactly the kind of houseguest who can take a room and expect to rest peacefully." Miramu said ironically. "I'm a killer, and I stir up bad feeling wherever I go. It's safer to be near the men who are

protecting me — your good selves — is it not? After all, if even one like Hyoushin can be slain… who knows what other dangers lurk?"

"You have heard, then, of Hyoushin's fate." Kintsusei turned to the Seishi quizzically, and Miramu nodded, his dark braid of hair falling over his shoulder as he did so.

"It's unfortunate." he said softly. "But not even an Emperor can still time or turn it back. He is dead. You would do far better to let it go and move on — for the sake of Kutou's people, isn't that your best course of action?"

"What do you know about being an Emperor?" Kintsusei snapped, and Kikei held up his hands, casting Miramu a dark glare as he did so.

"Miramu, you speak out of turn to his Highness." he reproached, and Miramu smirked, shrugging his shoulders.

"So I cause offence yet again. Nothing new there." He said flippantly. "I speak as I find, Heika… I'm sorry if the words cause pain."

"How much of recent events do you know, then, Assassin of the West?" Kintsusei raised an eyebrow. "Of Kayu's deployment, too?"

"Yes, of course — because I refused point blank to go with them." Miramu folded his arms across his chest. "I will not be in the same location as Toroki is — I have already encountered her more times than I wanted to, and I will not do so again. So yes, I know where Kayu has gone… and why. To retrieve the girl, Sukunami Hikari… correct?"

"You were the one who first alerted us to her." Kintsusei nodded. "So I trust your judgement in this, Miramu — you believe that she is important to Kutou's salvation?"

"She is the one who guards the Shinzahou, no doubt." Miramu looked amused. "Possibly she is more than that. But Toroki is Byakko's prophet. I'm just a shadow who earns his coins with blood."

"Toroki again." Kintsusei's eyes narrowed. "Miramu, you seem to fear and hate this woman. Is she so real a threat?"

"A threat?" Miramu echoed, then he laughed hollowly, shaking his head.

"She is one who sees the past, the present and the future." He said frankly. "If you consider knowledge a threat, Heika, then yes. She is a threat. But she has not predicted your death. Only mine. And for that reason, I will steer well clear of her… I'm sure you'll understand that

sometimes an assassin has to follow his own interests before those of his patrons, after all."

"Yes, I understand." Kintsusei's expression became thoughtful. "Your judgement then, also, on Toroki's sight. On her prediction that Hyoushin was a traitor to the East… do you have such faith in her visions to proclaim this truth?"

"Since the man is dead, it seems immaterial to me." Miramu leant back lazily against one of the chamber's immense marble pillars, shrugging his shoulders. "And I haven't spent enough time in Toroki's company to hear any prophesy. You are asking the wrong man, Heika. Kayu, Maichu, Hyoushin himself. They are the only ones who heard this famed prediction… I can't speculate on what I don't know. Still, it must not be forgotten that the prophet works for Kounan's interests… and her words may or may not be the truth of what she sees."

"Obtuse as ever." Kintsusei sighed, turning towards the window as he rested his hands on the sill. "To you, Miramu, it may be irrelevant. But he was a man I trusted a good deal. And I should like to know the truth… before I lay the matter to rest. Alive or dead, his soul still demands justice. And I will find out what that is."

"Heika, our concern now is the girl. Sukunami Hikari." Kikei said evenly. "And her connection to the Shinzahou of Suzaku."

"Suzaku's Shinzahou is an elusive beast, isn't it?" Miramu said cryptically. "I wonder… will the girl be able to tell you anything at all, in the end?"

"She is the one who protects the treasure, isn't she?" Kintsusei demanded, and Miramu spread his hands.

"So I've heard." He agreed vaguely. "But it's another rumour that interests me more. One that may not have reached Imperial ears yet — but one which may turn even a grieving Emperor away from the subject of a friend betrayed."

"What kind of rumour?" Kintsusei's eyes narrowed suspiciously, and Miramu laughed.

"You have become unnaturally cautious these last few days, Kintsusei-sama." He observed bluntly. "Although I can understand why — it is never wise to trust anyone in this world except your own self… and even then with careful consideration."

"I asked you a question, Nishi no Kage." Kintsusei snapped, and Miramu bowed his head, a faintly mocking air in his gesture.

“My apologies, Heika. It seems I’ve stepped out of line again.” He said, no sign of repentance in his tones. “But if you insist, I will tell you.”

His gaze darted towards Kikei momentarily, then he smiled.

“I don’t know if it makes him a traitor or otherwise.” He said slowly. “But before he departed this place, I learnt something from Hyoushin that may be of some use to you now. He had the earnest belief that that girl was not just a child of Kounan born to protect the Shinzahou. He seemed convinced that she had come here with some other purpose.”

“Hyoushin did?” Kintsusei demanded sharply, and Kikei’s eyes narrowed at this.

“What do you mean?” He asked. “You have not told me this, Miramu.”

“No, I suppose I haven’t.” Miramu reflected. “But Kintsusei-sama’s authority outstrips yours, Lord Priest… forgive me, but I cannot refuse the questions of an Emperor who pays my fees.”

“Don’t play games.” Kintsusei said softly. “What did Hyoushin keep from me — what did he tell you that he told noone else?”

“He did tell one other person.” Miramu settled himself more comfortably, tilting his head on one side. “The boy. Aoiketsu. Why do you suppose he had such an urge to go south, after all? To find the boy, no doubt. Or maybe — to find the *girl*. What a shame he never got to meet with either one — a lot of questions might have been answered if he had. Still, I’m here, and I have the knowledge you seek. The truth is simple, Heika. Hyoushin believed that the girl — Sukunami Hikari — was not from Kounan at all. He believed she was Seiryuu no Miko — sent here to raise the God and save Kutou.”

“*What?*” Kintsusei’s eyes almost fell out of his head, and Kikei swallowed hard, grabbing Miramu by the shoulders as he stared at him in disbelief.

“Why did you not tell us this earlier?” He demanded, and Miramu shrugged.

“It seemed a stupid fantasy.” He said casually. “But I discussed it with Suiko and she seems to agree. So it makes Kayu’s mission all the more important — doesn’t it?”

“Hyoushin… went South… *knowing* this?” Kintsusei murmured. “But… then he didn’t… he didn’t go to betray me at all! He went… to

find… the Miko? To bring her to Kutou… and yet…"

He faltered, sinking down in his seat, and Kikei bowed his head, putting his hands together as if in prayer.

"If this is so, Kintsusei-sama, it appears a great wrong has been done him." He said gravely, shooting Miramu a look of dislike as he did so. "If this Assassin had spoken sooner, perhaps his fate could have been prevented."

"Oh, I doubt it." Miramu's lip curled in derision at this. "Hyoushin may be a traitor or a martyr. But he was marked by death a long time ago. He may have escaped it when his village was destroyed… and in battle for his Emperor and his country. But the South is a notoriously hostile area for people from the East, is it not? Enemies long time since? As soon as he crossed the border… he was out of Kutou's hands. And death stalks the South."

Kintsusei's eyes narrowed.

"If you speak the truth, Miramu, then I*will* have Sukunami Hikari brought here, whatever the method used to do it." He said quietly. "I want her alive, and I want to speak to her myself about the fate of this country. If she is truly our Miko, she has fallen into the clutches of our enemy. And we must push forward in doing what Hyoushin clearly died trying to do — we must extricate her and bring her back to the country she is meant to save."

He glanced at Kikei, resolution firming once more in his eyes.

"Contact Kayu and tell him." He said frankly. "Aoiketsu and Maichu are no longer the prime focus of his visit to the South, and the matter of the Shinzahou can also wait. Sukunami Hikari is the one I want to see. We have treasures enough, surely, for her to raise the God… if she is truly Seiryuu no Miko, I must speak with her. Before it is too late and before more of my people are condemned to death in this land!"

"So that's what happened."

Chichiri sank down beside the chair, a troubled frown on his face as he cast a glance across towards the farmyard grounds. "I see. And there's no knowing where the boy's gone, either, I suppose… if he was upset, he might have ended up anywhere."

"Myoume's gone to look for him." Hyoushin said quietly, flinching slightly as the sorcerer carefully unwound his bandages, examining the wound on his side. "She said she thought she might sense his

whereabouts, since she has encountered him before and at present his emotions are very strong. Chichiri, you should not pay so much attention to me. I am not the one who is worst hurt by this."

"But you're the one for whom I can possibly do something." Chichiri sighed, shaking his head. "Although I think perhaps you're more upset than you're letting me see, aren't you? You pushed yourself this morning, Hyoushin — you were determined not to let them fight."

"I trained both boys. They are both my men." Hyoushin said hollowly. "What else should I do? I didn't want this."

"No. Noone did." Chichiri's brow creased, and he glanced towards the farm grounds again, taking in the huddled form of the young soldier beneath the plum tree. Across from him, a noteable distance away, an anxious Hikari hovered, and from the tension in both of their demeanours, Chichiri knew that the events of that morning had struck deep.

"Aoiketsu has something different about him since he came back." He murmured. "I can feel it, prickling in his aura. You see it too, don't you? You know him as well as anyone — there's something else about him that's been threatening to show itself for a while."

"I've never seen that boy come so close to blood without flinching." Hyoushin admitted. "Although I knew he had helped me… I understood it was the influence of Suzaku's blade that prevented him from being weakened. But he did not have the *shinken* with him today… yet he was quite determined. And he would not leave Kayu's body until Myoume assured him that he would be properly buried, here in the village."

"He's lost a friend, another friend is suffering…" Chichiri looked troubled, sitting back on his heels. "Fortunately I don't think your own efforts have hurt you too much more — though you're not strong enough to start fighting with anyone, on any account. Myoume's right when she says your life is precious too — you shouldn't be so reckless."

"They are my men, Chichiri. I could do nothing else."

"Yes, I understand." Chichiri nodded. "But even so — take care of yourself a little, please."

"Do you think Aoiketsu is all right?" Hyoushin asked softly, and at the question Chichiri frowned, seeing the genuine concern flicker in the Meihi's clever amethyst eyes.

“That’s a difficult question to answer.” He admitted honestly. “The truth is, we know that he’s in some ways connected to Seiryuu — and to Nakago. Myoume intimated to me that she felt Nakago in his aura, and I’ve felt it too. Aoi told me himself that she’d suggested his squeamishness might be Seiryuu’s way of preventing him turning out like his father. But… I suppose, if enough were to press against his sense of right and wrong, that barrier might be broken. The *shinken* might have begun it — fighting with a sword belonging to someone for whom doing right was as easy and as logical as breathing in could have had an impact. Especially since Hotohori-sama once spilled Nakago’s blood onto that blessed blade… but more, I think it’s something within Aoi himself. Little by little he’s starting to become Hikari’s protector in all ways — and a soldier who fears blood can’t fight. Today’s events just capped it off… it was the last straw, to see one friend cut down by another in such a way. If there was a seal, he’s broken through it. And if there wasn’t, then finally, he’s found the resolve to overcome it.”

“But what does that mean for him?” Hyoushin frowned. “I do not want him to be harmed by this, Chichiri. I did not raise him to be Nakago’s shadow, but his own self. And his nature… is not a cruel one.”

“Nor was Nakago’s, I imagine, before circumstances drove him over the edge.” Chichiri reflected, and Hyoushin’s eyes became grave.

“Yes. I believe you are right.” He admitted. “In the short time I knew the Shougun, such was my own impression of him. It is easier to understand the actions of another when you have suffered similar circumstances, after all.”

“But you are different from Nakago.” Chichiri got to his feet, setting his ointment aside as he gazed down on his wounded companion. “You have taken a different path — you prefer to pursue peace, not revenge or chaos.”

“Maybe my mode of revenge *is* the pursuit of peace.” Hyoushin reflected, and Chichiri raised an eyebrow.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, surely it is the best form of vengeance, if you can squash the darkness with light.” Hyoushin said pensively. “Allowing it to taint your actions only makes you complicit. Eradicating the things that hurt me is my form of revenge, if you like. Consigning them to oblivion forever… that is my way of avenging my past.”

“I see.” Despite himself, a faint smile touched Chichiri’s lips. “Well,

that's an original way of looking at it, I suppose. But whatever your motivation, the values are the same — positive ones, as opposed to the negative ones that seared Nakago's heart. And those values are the things you've taught that boy… it just remains to be seen if he's strong enough to hold on to those while Seiryuu's spirit swirls within him. Seiryuu is the God of fighting, after all… that can't be helped."

"Maybe that girl will be the answer." Hyoushin sighed, and Chichiri could see the weariness in the Meihi's gaze. "Truly, I have never seen him form an attachment like this before. It does not displease me — all the more now. Maichu and Aoiketsu are very different beasts… and while Maichu will hurt most, Aoiketsu will hurt longest."

"Aoi won't blame Maichu though, will he?" Chichiri asked, and Hyoushin shook his head.

"No." He replied. "Maichu is his closest friend, and besides, Aoiketsu is a good judge of situation. I think from his own words he understands more what has happened than Maichu yet does… that is perhaps his failing in all of this. Maichu's shock has been great… but if he can be convinced the blame is not with him, in time I think he will forgive himself. Aoiketsu has already made the connection to Kikei and his manipulations — and his grievance is growing ever more complex."

"Perhaps I should talk to him." Chichiri suggested, and Hyoushin sighed.

"I don't think he will listen, yet." He murmured. "Not until Maichu is back here, in any case. Chichiri, this cannot continue — Aoiketsu was right about that. We must move, and quickly. Things are becoming serious. If the mountain has also been stormed, there may not be much time left."

"You're in no fit state to travel to Kutou." Chichiri said firmly. "We haven't saved your life for you to throw it away."

"My life and everyone else's will be forfeit if Seiryuu no Miko does not soon go to Kutou." Hyoushin said matter-of-factly. "Is that not true? Today I saw with my own eyes how Toroki's prophesies pan out. I will not argue with anything else she predicts. There isn't time for me to convalesce here. If Kutou must be saved, then it must be saved. And if I must go and speak to my Emperor, then so I must. Regardless of the risk or the cost — I must."

"Papa?"

Before Chichiri could reply, the door swung open, and Meikyo

poked her head around it, ruby eyes big as she eyed the adults' expressions. "I'm very sorry to disturb you but Kaa-san said that I should give this to you. She said it might be important, so I…"

She faltered, biting her lip, and Chichiri sighed, beckoning for her to come in.

"It's all right, Mei-chan — come do as you've been asked." He said gently. "I'm sorry — this has been a confusing few days for you and your brother, hasn't it, with all this coming and going in the village?"

"Is Tenshi-san all right?" Meikyo asked anxiously, obediently slipping into the room as she trotted up to them. "He looks sick again, Papa… did he get poisoned again?"

"No, he just pushed himself too far in Kounan's heat." Chichiri shook her head. "And I've told you, Meikyo, about calling him that."

"Oh." Meikyo reddened, lowering her gaze. "I'm sorry, T… Hyoushin-san. I forgot."

"It's all right." Hyoushin held out a clumsy right hand to touch the girl's cheek, and Meikyo glanced up, eyes wide with surprise at his gesture. "I am no angel, Meikyo, but if you wish to call me so, I do not mind. After all, many people have seen my colouring and called me various things — a ghost, a man of snow, a statue of marble… even a demon. But you do not see that, do you? In all my life, noone has ever likened my appearance to that of an angel."

"Is it really all right?" Meikyo looked doubtful. "I don't want to be rude. If I was, Kaa-san would be angry and Papa would be disappointed in me. But it's so hard to remember. You… you're so pretty and you look like an angel to me."

"I'm not sure pretty is the right word for it, Mei-chan." Despite himself, a smile touched the edges of Chichiri's lips. "But I suppose if Hyoushin doesn't mind it, I won't try and stop you. Why did your mother send you, anyway? What was it she wanted you to give to me?"

"Oh!" Meikyo's eyes widened and she nodded, holding out her burden to her father. Chichiri took it gingerly, eying the bundle of cloth in some confusion. Slowly he unwrapped it, then paused as he realised the material hid a mirror, its surface glittering with something other than reflective light. He touched his index finger to it, then eyed his daughter questioningly.

"Where did she get this?" He asked softly, and Meikyo's expression became grave.

“From the Onii-san who died in the forest.” She said soberly. “When she was cleaning his body so he could be buried in clean clothes in the village, she found this and thought you should have it. It’s not a very pretty mirror, is it Papa? And the glass is all smoky… I don’t understand why he had it with him. It can’t have been very useful at all.”

“A mirror?” Hyoushin’s brows knitted together, and he held out his right hand, eying the sorcerer as he did so.

“May I see, please?” He asked, and Chichiri nodded, handing the implement over. Hyoushin set it carefully down on his lap, running his hand over the surface thoughtfully for a moment. Then he closed his eyes, murmuring something under his breath. He glanced up.

“This is a charmed mirror.” He said softly. “One of Kikei’s spells hangs over it like the stench of a dead rat, no doubt — I have carried a similar one, once before, as a medium through which to communicate directly with my Emperor. Of course, that was before my position became so tenuous and I was exiled here. But this is how Kayu was receiving his orders — part of the conspiracy and I was not even aware.”

“Is it a bad mirror?” Meikyo looked worried. “Is it cursed, then…? With bad magic? Is that why the Nii-san died?”

“Kayu was killed by a curse all right, but not because of this mirror.” Chichiri rested his palm on the surface, closing his eyes as he carefully disabled the magic that surrounded it. “There. Kikei’s link to it has been broken — but I’m surprised. I hadn’t realised that this Priest possessed some level of spiritual power… if he’s merely inhabiting the post of Seiryuu’s priest, I’m amazed he’s managed to hone any kind of skills. But even though this spell isn’t a hard one — it requires some latent natural ability.”

“Meaning he’s a sorcerer too, like you are?” Hyoushin asked. Chichiri shook his head, drawing his hand away from the mirror as he folded his hands together.

“I don’t think so.” He replied. “At least, his power isn’t divinely given. I’m chosen by Suzaku to wield the magic I do, and I use it for that end. But there are people who have a natural propensity to spells and incantations. If a man truly seeks to awaken it, he can draw on his own strength to manifest some level of power. Kikei appears to be one such individual. If he is capable of this level incantation, we can’t rule out the possibility that he might be capable of more.”

“Such a thing is unusual?” Hyoushin looked surprised, and Chichiri

shrugged.

“Those who awaken these powers usually do so because they have chosen a spiritual life.” He responded. “Kikei must have manipulated his lifestyle to suit his ends. He’s learnt the skills of a Priest and more, by the looks… an ordinary Hin he may be, but I think he might prove to be a sinister opponent if we met him face to face.”

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

“But not a match for my own sorcery.” He added, holding the mirror out. “Mei-chan, take this back with you to Aidou. It should be buried with Kayu in the village… there’s no other use for it here, now the spell over it has been broken… and considering its provenance, it’s not something I want around here.”

“All right.” Meikyo nodded. “If it’s not a bad mirror any more, I’ll take it and tell Kaa-san what you said.”

She cast Hyoushin a wide grin, bowing her head towards him.

“Feel better soon, Tenshi-san.” She said sincerely. “I like that you came to stay here.”

Then she was gone, and Hyoushin shook his head slowly.

“Your daughter is such an innocent.” He murmured. “In the streets of Kutou’s capital and in the courts of the Emperor both I have encountered many remarks on my appearance… being a Meihi in such a place and in an Imperial uniform does draw attention, after all. The comments are not all pleasant — often they are quite the opposite, although I have never let it trouble me too greatly. Yet noone has ever likened the visage of a Meihi to an angel sent by some divine force. Your child’s thoughts are automatically to good things, not bad. Her innocence is something I’d like to bring to Kutou — but more, I’m finding I’d like to be able to preserve it here, too. I’m coming to realise what it is the East fears about the South after all.”

“Fears about the South?” Chichiri eyed him in surprise, and Hyoushin nodded slowly.

“This sense of solidarity that they can neither understand nor break down.” He agreed sadly. “I am a man of Kutou and I will always be — I have no intention of staying in exile here or in Hokkan with my sister. But I am not blind to my nation’s flaws… given my history, how can I be? There are truly good souls in the East, and yet many of them are too afraid to bridge age-old rifts and join together. It is this reason that has prevented Kutou from finding salvation — of this I am sure.”

“Hisei said the same thing, in the cave beneath the mountain.” Chichiri sighed. “That Kutou had marked its own fate by allowing things like genocide and betrayal to take place. It’s a long term pattern in their history, so it seems — your people, Nakago’s people, but also other peoples, too.”

“Kayu and Maichu’s conflict is almost symbolic of Kutou’s state of being.” Hyoushin’s eyes clouded over. “Friend versus friend in a battle for what is right.”

“Well, we’ll have to do something about that.” Chichiri reflected. “I’ll have to think this over… and see what our best course of action is. Once Kayu is laid to rest, and once Maichu has been retrieved… then we’ll talk about what we’re going to do next. But for the time being…”

He paused, brushing his fingers against Hyoushin’s brow, then nodding.

“Meikyo isn’t wrong.” He owned. “You are warmer than you were, and that’s thanks to your exertions in the sun. I think the best thing would be for you to rest — sleep, if you can, and try not to worry about these things. We’re on the same side, after all, and Maichu and Aoi are both as much my responsibility now as yours, since you asked Hikari for help. So you don’t have to take everything onto your shoulders any more. At the moment, you’re not fit to do that — and we don’t want to lose anyone else.”

Hyoushin sighed, but Chichiri saw the flicker of resignation in his gaze. Slowly he nodded.

“I am hardly fit to do anything but obey.” He admitted. “But I am not happy about it. Had I been full strength, I would have stopped the fight before it had begun… Miramu also has much to answer for in Kayu’s death.”

“And we won’t let it go unavenged.” Chichiri assured him gravely. “But listen — this hunger strike of yours also needs to stop. You couldn’t have stopped that fight no matter what this morning — but if you continue not to eat, you won’t be strong enough to travel anywhere. You’re hampering your own recovery, Hyoushin — this isn’t your time as a slave and you don’t have to survive on nothing but water and scraps. I realise you’re feeling unwell and that your arm hurts — I know the herahisa made you nauseous yesterday and I’ve held off on you till now because of it. But almost forty eight hours have passed since you arrived here, and Maichu said you barely ate anything on the journey South, either — a journey which must have

covered three or four days at the very least. That can't go on — I won't let it go on. If you really want to help your Emperor, you have to eat."

Hyoushin's eyes widened at the stern tone in the sorcerer's voice, and for a moment he did not answer. Then he let out a rueful laugh, a faint flicker of wry acceptance in his usually impassive amethyst eyes.

"Perhaps I am not the only one used to being in a position of command." He reflected. "You are quite a force yourself, if you want to be, aren't you, Chichiri?"

"If I want to be, perhaps." Chichiri agreed lightly. "But you know I'm right."

"Yes, I do." Hyoushin agreed. "And I will take your words on board. When we left Hokkan, I had much on my mind other than food, and since we crossed into warmer territory my appetite has gone completely. Thanks to Kounan's humid air and blazing sun I have been tired and fighting just to move forwards. But it cannot go on, I realise that. I must force myself to overcome it. This morning's conflict has told me that as much as anything — even if I could not have stopped that fight, it may come to it where the difference between life and death is what little strength I can muster."

He glanced at his left arm, then sighed.

"I do not know if this will heal, but since you are giving me every help you can, I must also help myself." He added. "I will follow your advice, Chichiri-sensei… you need not badger me any further. This evening, when the sun has gone down and the air is cooler — I promise I will eat."

"Then that's one less thing for me to worry about." Relief flickered in Chichiri's heart. "Good. Then you get some rest, and let me worry about our next step. We'll talk again tonight — all of us, I hope, if Myoume and Maichu are back by then. And then maybe we'll know what we're going to need to do."

Author's brief note:
*Kintsusei calls Miramu "***Nishi no Kage**西の影*) which means '***Shadow of the West***' in Japanese. Kage* 影*or" shadow" is the character Miramu wears on the collar that hides his celestial mark from view. Nishi no Kage is therefore the name he goes by as an assassin, in mockery of his Celestial identity (Byakko no Amefuri or Nishi no Amefuri).*
Usually I write it in English but somehow it just slipped out that way this time around… and it sounded good… so I thought I ought to footnote :)

Sorry about that…
Vraie :D

Chapter 20

Chapter Nineteen

“What exactly are you playing at, Miramu?”

Kikei wheeled on the assassin, annoyance flaring in his beady black eyes as he gazed at his companion indignantly. “Theorising about Seiryuu no Miko — why would you not tell me that, before dropping it into the Emperor’s lap? I thought we had agreed — we would share information with one another and hold nothing back.”

“I’m not a fool, Kikei.” Miramu said simply, leaping deftly up onto the dais that housed Seiryuu’s golden statue and settling himself against the dragon’s tail. “You didn’t divulge everything to me, and so I was making a point. I’m happy to be loyal to you — to give you every shard of information I unearth — so long as I know I’m not being duped in the meantime. Did I make it clearly enough? I’d like to think that I did. I’m your ally, but I can be swayed — if you do not show me the same trust as you expect me to show you.”

“I see.” Kikei’s eyes narrowed. “Be more explicit — just what do you imagine I’ve kept from you, Miramu?”

“That you plan to use Seiryuu no Miko to eradicate the Celestial Warriors from this world.” Miramu said frankly. “Suiko said as much to me — and when I think about it, I’m sure that she told me the truth. She’s a funny beast, that mage — but she has Seiryuu on the brain and it makes her tongue loose.”

“Suiko.” Kikei pursed his lips, then he shrugged, spreading his hands.

“All right.” He acknowledged. “Yes, this is the truth. That Seiryuu no Miko’s power can annihilate the Seishi’s irritating presence is beyond doubt. When Hongou Yui was here, she wished to seal Suzaku’s power away and so she managed to do, until a weak heart made her unseal it again. That being the case, I thought to take it one step further. But you should be glad, Miramu — if I succeed, then the one whose presence dogs your existance will no longer be a threat to you — will she?”

“I presume by that you mean Toroki.” Miramu said softly, and Kikei nodded his head.

“Yes.” He agreed evenly. “So in the end, my plans benefit you as well. Perhaps you’ll think on that the next time, before dropping information on me unawares like that.”

“My apologies, Lord Priest.” Miramu bowed his head mockingly in the other man’s direction. “I’m sure that it won’t need to happen again.”

He shrugged.

“Besides, it isn’t like I kept the information from you, in the end.” He reflected. “If Hyoushin and Suiko are right, that brat Hikari is the Miko. And so bringing her here suits your plans, doesn’t it?”

“It does.” Kikei agreed, moving over to the holy flames as he raised his hands alongside it. “And the sooner I convey that to Kayu, the better. I have no interest in his recovering his comrades — to arrange for their removal would be messy and troublesome since you don’t seem inclined to carry out the task yourself. If he only finds the girl, so much to the good. We don’t need another mage — we have two powerful spirits already in our power, after all. And if Seiryuu no Miko possesses Suzaku’s Shinzahou, then truly that is all we need.”

“She does. Of that I am quite certain.” Miramu gazed pensively up towards the dragon’s glittering azure eyes. “But she might not come easily. She has allied with the South, after all.”

“But once her duties are explained to her, I’m sure she’ll come around.” Kikei responded. “And if not, I’m sure there will be ways to make her do so… don’t you agree?”

“Forcing a child to act on your wishes.” Miramu tut-tutted. “You’re becoming even more shameless in your quest for power, you know. You’re beginning to startle even me — do you really plan on torturing a girl to make her do as you please?”

“My magic is not feeble, and I’m sure something could be arranged.” Kikei said levelly. “More to the point, however, girls from the other world have soft hearts. If she can’t be persuaded verbally, then I’m sure she can be convinced in other ways. The Southerners are dispensible, after all… if she has any fondness for them, perhaps she’ll act in our favour to keep them safe.”

“But by your own words, Chichiri and Tasuki will be killed.” Miramu said softly, and Kikei smiled.

“Such are the spoils of war.” He said glibly. “Now shut up. I need to concentrate on my magic — making contact with Kayu when he’s so far away isn’t an easy task.”

Miramu pulled a face, but obediently fell silent, folding his arms across his chest as he watched the Priest draw his hands across the flame, murmuring a soft incantation as he did so. For a moment the fire glittered and danced, then, with a flicker of light it dropped, the edges of the glow touched with a faint reddish tinge. Kikei frowned, reaching out to touch it gingerly, and as he did so, a tongue of flame flared up and licked at his fingers, causing him to let out a cry of surprise.

"Well?" Miramu eyed him keenly. "They say those who play with fire get burnt, Kikei — what have you done now?"

"Nothing." Kikei glanced at his hand, then back at the fire in disbelief and consternation. "I cast the usual spell to contact the mirror, but something is in my way. Something strong… I don't know what it is, but it's blocking my path to Kayu."

"Something strong, huh?" Miramu leapt down from his perch, crossing the floor as he peered into the flames. "Perhaps your boy has got himself into trouble."

"Kayu isn't a fool." Kikei snapped, but there was anxiety in his dark eyes. "Something has intercepted our mode of contact — that's all. A spell… a barrier… something of that nature."

"So you can't make contact, then?" Miramu asked innocently, and Kikei's expression darkened.

"Don't mock me." He snapped. "I will find a way to reach the mirror… it may just take more time."

"I would give up now, if I were you." Miramu said lazily. "That flame is red-gold, Kikei — the colour of the Phoenix. On my travels south I encountered Suzaku's people — the bandit who throws fire and the apothecary who casts spells. If I'm not mistaken, this is Chichiri's work… he's a more skilful sorcerer than you are a Priest. Likely he's put a barrier around his territory to protect it from adverse magic — and Kayu is no longer within your reach. You can try all you like — but you won't break through."

"Chichiri, huh?" Kikei folded his hands in the voluminous sleeves of his robe, looking thoughtful. "And this is your expert opinion? That his magic is strong enough to block the link with mine?"

"Without doubt. He is a Seishi, after all." Miramu said evenly. Kikei's eyes narrowed.

"There is more than one way to send a message, however." He mused. "And I must make contact with Kayu."

“Why do you not just allow your boy to act on his own?” Miramu asked. “He knows his mission, after all. Or don’t you trust him?”

“He won’t betray me. I’ve made sure of that.” Kikei shook his head. “Perhaps you’re right. He is a strong fighter and a resourceful young man. Besides, I have preparations to make. Sooner or later, if that girl is Seiryuu’s Miko, she will come here even if Kayu does not manage to locate her. I must just be patient, and make sure everything is ready for when she does. After all, her fate and Kutou’s fate coincide. And I’ll be ready and waiting to greet her when they do.”

Now what should he do?

In the bright summer sunlight, Maichu pushed through the trees and bushes, his mind half numb as he stumbled forward, away from the scene of the fight. He did not know or care where he was going — just away, as if somehow by putting distance between him and Kayu’s body, he could pretend that it had not happened at all.

It was still a blur, he acknowledged bitterly to himself. How it had gone from a battle of words to a fight to the death still eluded him — and as he thought on it, guilt stabbed through him once more, almost paralysing his breathing as he relived the encounter in his head, trying in vain to piece together what had happened.

Kayu had been his friend, after all. And yet, in the end, that had meant nothing at all.

“Toroki’s warning came true.” He muttered. “One slain by a brother or a friend. Damn it all to hell, Maichu, what were you thinking? To protect the Commander — sure — but when you raised your sword you only meant to disarm him… not this.”

He closed his eyes, resting his hands against the trunk of a nearby tree as he struggled to get his wrenched emotions under control. Tears pricked at the back of his eyes, and he fought to keep them back, knowing that if he lost that battle, he would disgrace himself utterly.

“But what kind of soldier does that make me?” He whispered. “One who’ll kill his comrade… what kind of person am I, dammit, when I can do something like that?”

He drew a shaky breath into his lungs, pushing forward once again as he remembered Aoiketsu’s shocked expression and the glazed tinge of Kayu’s dark eyes as he had fallen to the ground. He had died at once, Maichu knew that. He had struck through the boy’s heart in the way he had been trained to take out enemies on the battlefield, and

even before he had hit the earth, the young soldier's life had been stolen away. Yet even the knowledge that it had been a quick, clean death did nothing to comfort Maichu's anguish.

"If only he had killed me." He whispered, clenching his fists. "That would have been better… if he had killed me instead."

At that moment he reached a break in the trees, and he faltered, gazing uncomprehendingly at the white-stone structure that stood before him. For a moment he did not know where he was, but then flickers of memory returned to him and he took a hesitant step or two forward, resting his hands against the bright white walls as if somehow he could draw strength from their sturdiness.

"I've come to that mountain, haven't I?" He realised dully. "Shit, I walked that far? I wasn't even payin' attention… but this is the place that boy Jin was buried. That's what Aoi told me, when we came to get that goddamned sword from Tasuki. I should'a left it with him — then this wouldn't have happened. I ain't old enough to handle it properly — the bandit was right, I am still just a stupid kid after all!"

"*Maichu*?" A voice from the trees startled him and he swung around like an animal cornered in headlights, staring all around him for the speaker. As he did so, there was the rustle of tree branches overhead, and then a slim figure dropped down deftly in front of him, brushing the stray leaves and bark from her clothing as she eyed him in consternation.

"Shishi." Somehow Maichu managed to speak, though for a reason he couldn't define the sight of the forthright young bandit caused his emotions to choke up inside him once more. He held out his hands, shaking his head firmly as he did so.

"Don't come near me. I don't want to talk to you — or anyone. Jus' leave me be."

"Shit, melodramatic much." Shishi's brows creased in confusion. "What the hell bit you, you idiot? You've come here on your own — weren't you supposed to be playin' guard over your Commander? Chichiri an' the rest have gone lookin' for you as it is… and you're here all of a sudden?"

She eyed him quizzically.

"Dammit, you lost your friggin' sword again, already? Yeesh, you really are a goddamn liability, aren't you?"

"You have no idea." Maichu turned his back on her, afraid that if the conversation continued, he might lose his tenuous grip on his self

control. “Get lost, will you? I told you — I don’t want to talk to you. This ain’t something you could understand — after all, you’re just a kid.”

“Don’t call me that, when you’re only a few years older an’ a lot less smart.” Shishi snapped, crossing the clearing and clipping him across the back of the head. “Besides, you’re the one who shouldn’t be here. This is Jin’s restin’ place, not some joint you can scramble all over playin’ hide an’ seek with your sword. If you want to be alone, you should go somewhere else, an’…shit, Maichu, you’ve got *blood* on your sleeves!”

At this exclamation, Maichu raised his gaze to hers, eying her mutely, and Shishi’s bronze gaze darkened with comprehension.

“Some o’ those Kutou jerks *did* gatecrash you as well then, huh?” She asked softly. “Chichiri was right — there *was* a fight. Maybe Kashira an’ I should’a followed on, instead of makin’ sure Hisei’s shrine was sealed back up safe. Is that why you’re here? You don’t look hurt — but that’s blood, for sure… is someone else in trouble?”

“No.” Maichu said flatly. “It’s over.”

Shishi eyed him for a moment, then she reached across to grab him around the wrists, holding them up to examine them more closely.

“*Fresh* blood nonetheless.” She realised. “Somethin’ must’ve happened all right. An’ that’s how you lost your sword?”

“Let go of me.” Maichu wrenched his arms away, glaring at her indignantly. “I told you, it’s over. I took care of it. It’s over. I don’t need you interfering — just leave it alone and butt out o’ things that aren’t your friggin’ business, will you?”

Shishi’s eyes narrowed, as she glanced from his bloodsoaked arms to his clouded, troubled expression. She pursed her lips.

“Shoutin’ round Jin’s memorial ain’t somethin’ I easily forgive.” She said softly. “My brother’s restin’ an’ he doesn’t need the likes o’ you yellin’ an’ disturbin’ his peace.”

“It hardly matters.” Maichu muttered. “Why won’t you just leave me alone, Shishi? What the hell is wrong with your ears?”

“Because you look like you might do somethin’ you’ll regret, right now.” Shishi said frankly. Maichu let out a derisive snort.

“*Do* something?” He echoed, and Shishi nodded.

“You look like a man ready to slash his own throat.” She said

bluntly. “An’ that’d make a shitload of mess over Jin’s clean burial place, wouldn’t it?”

Maichu didn’t answer, and Shishi sighed, shaking her head.

“Are you goin’ to tell me what you’ve done?” She asked softly. “Or do I have to force it out of you?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“Yes, it is.” Shishi was unmoved. “This is Kashira’s mountain. I’m Kashira’s cub. You’ve come here, so you can answer to one of us… or both. Besides, we’re allies now, ain’t we? On the same side in all of this. So you can spill it, an’ I’ll tell you what an idiot you are, an’ then we’ll move on an’ do somethin’ useful… okay? None of this melodramatic sulkin’ — it just wastes time.”

Maichu opened his mouth to retort, but before he could do so, there was the sound of footsteps and both youngsters turned to register the presence of the bandit’s Kashira at the clearing’s edge. He glanced at the young soldier, then frowned, nodding his head.

“So you already found him, Shishi.” He said softly. “Good. That saves me time.”

“Found… him?” Shishi looked blank, and Tasuki nodded.

“Myoume just arrived back here… she said that he’d taken off an’ that she thought she sensed him somewhere on this mountain.” He agreed, walking towards them and resting his hand firmly on Maichu’s shoulder. “An’ I guess her hunch was right. Well, kid? You want to tell me what this is all about, or what?”

“It ain’t your business either.” Maichu said frankly, raising his dark eyes to Tasuki’s bronze ones. “Myoume shouldn’t have been interferin’ — she’s damn well done enough, makin’ predictions an’ shit…”

He trailed off, and Tasuki sighed, shaking his head.

“She seemed to think it would be a good idea if I found you.” He said evenly. “She told me what happened in the forest… an’ I can see from your eyes that it ain’t somethin’ you’ll accept easily. So I guess that means I’m goin’ to have to talk it out with you — at least, since there are folk worryin’, I’m goin’ to make sure I don’t let you out of my sight for a while.”

“What do you mean, Papa? What happened in the forest?” Shishi demanded, and Maichu flinched as Tasuki’s expression became grave.

“The kid fought to defend his Commander an’ drew blood as a

result." He said evenly. "That's all."

"*All*?" Maichu reacted angrily, pushing the bandit away as he glared up at him. "How can you say it like that, as if it ain't important! Kayu was my goddamn friend, dammit! My friend! And yet I go an' do something like that…"

"You*killed* him?" Shishi's eyes became huge, and at her expression, Maichu felt the fight drain out of him. He groaned, sinking down against the memorial's reassuring stone wall as he buried his head in his hands.

"I didn't mean it to happen that way." He murmured, his words muffled behind his hands. "But Kayu was goin' to kill the Commander an' the next thing I knew we'd gone from shoutin' to fightin' an… an'…and then he was there, an' I'd put my blade through him like… like he was my enemy."

"Wasn't he?" Tasuki asked bluntly, and Maichu's head shot up, staring at him in confusion.

"Kayu was my *friend*." He responded. "He and I… we've always been buddies. Always. Aoi, Kayu and me… well, me more than Aoi, where Kayu was concerned. He even said that — that we were friends an' he'd come to try an' prevent me goin' down for treason. But I…"

"He drew his sword on his Commander, didn't he?"

"Yes, but…"

"An' you ain't the kind of boy to stand back when someone you respect is in danger, are you?" Tasuki dropped down beside him, gesturing for Shishi to follow suit, and slowly the young bandit did as she was bidden, crossing her legs as she made herself comfortable on the grass. She peered at Maichu like he was some kind of zoo exhibit, and Maichu bit his lip, aware that his tears were on the verge of falling.

"But Kayu was my friend." He whispered. "Even if he did attack Hyoushin-sama… he was still my… my friend."

"Well, we all fight battles we don't like, an' have things we're ashamed of rememberin'." Tasuki said reflectively. "I know where you're comin' from, kid — I understand better'n you think, because I'm a bandit an' Reikaku-zan's rogues are almost like a brotherhood in their loyalty to one another. If I'd run through one of my fellows — I'd feel pretty shit about it too, by all accounts. But if that guy had betrayed me… if he'd turned against this mountain an' joined Kaou-zan instead… then even if I hated it, I'd still do it. Because it'd be my

job to, as Kashira of Reikaku-zan. Even if I felt sick about it after. That's how it is, after all, when you learn to wield a blade."

Maichu stared at him in surprise, and Tasuki smiled, a wolfish, rueful glint entering his bronze eyes.

"My men fought for the Emperor in the last war." He said softly. "But even aside from that, I was chosen by Suzaku to help save Kounan. That meant, sometimes, I fought people I didn't want to fight. I killed people I wouldn't normally have killed. An' worst, I stood back and wasn't able to help people I wanted to save, because of the goal we had to complete. Betrayin' someone is the worst crime a man can commit… I understand that, an' that you feel so strong about it proves you have good stuff inside o' you — good enough to even be a bandit, if you really worked hard at it. But even despite that, kid, you ain't the one who did wrong. The betrayal wasn't yours this time."

"Even if you say that, I still feel like it's something unforgivable." Maichu lowered his gaze. "Because we trained together, travelled together… we were good buddies an' I didn't want it to end up this way."

"An' if you'd stood back an' let him kill a wounded man… what would that have made you?" Tasuki demanded. "A goddamn coward, that's what. Shit, listen to me. Chichiri an' me — Kouji an' me — we're old friends an' I trust them more than I trust myself, sometimes. But if one o' them attacked Anzu or Shishi… I'd not hesitate to draw my weapon an' fight 'em. Even kill them. Because in the end, they would'a betrayed my trust first… an' there ain't no way I would stand back an' let someone I cared about get hurt."

Maichu stared at the bandit for a moment, feeling the warm trickle of tears begin to roll down his cheeks. He cursed, dashing them away, but Tasuki grinned, shaking his head.

"It ain't a crime to cry if it's over somethin' like this." He said evenly. "It doesn't make you a wimp, because you feel to blame. At the end of the day, kid, you killed him an' that's somethin' you won't ever be able to forget. But you gotta get over it an' move on. Kayu was your friend, but he was a friend who betrayed you an' your Emperor. A friend who might have helped to destroy everythin' you an' that Meihi of yours believe in — right? You're a soldier, after all. You're trained to fight in your Emperor's name. Ain't that what you did, today? After all, bein' a warrior ain't a game. You can't pick an' choose your opponents. You can only follow your instinct an' do the thing that's right."

Maichu closed his eyes, drawing a deep breath into his lungs to steady himself. Then he frowned.

“Aoi and the others… I don’t know how to face them.” He admitted. “When Aoi saw… what I’d done…”

“Aoi is a soldier too.” Shishi said frankly. “And Papa’s right, you know. Kayu came here to hurt people and to get Hiki, most likely… didn’t he? So you got rid of him and that’s that. Even if it’s a bit shit for you right now — you just did your job, that’s all. Chichiri left you to protect Hyoushin, right? You can’t sit and cry over having done so. Sounds to me like that Kayu was an idiot… and he just got what was coming to him in the end.”

“Shishi.” Maichu glared at her, and Shishi shrugged.

“It’s how it seems to me.” She said evenly. “Besides, this is almost a war, ain’t it? It’s not a full blown one, yet — but it might as well be. Jin’s already died because of all of this — an’ now we have soldiers turning up in Kounan looking for our treasures. If you hadn’t killed that guy — what do you think he’d have done? Even if he hadn’t killed your Commander, or you — do you think he’d have kept his mouth shut? He’d have gone after Hiki and he might’ve hurt her — and if that happens we’re all screwed. He might’ve gone back to Kutou an’ told them all kinds of shit… includin’ the fact Hyoushin was still here an’ whatever else he might’ve learnt. On that basis, if I’d been there, I’d have probably killed the guy myself. Because he’s dead, he can’t talk. That’s better than havin’ him runnin’ riot around the place, even if you can’t see it that way yet.”

“Maichu’s a touch close to the problem to see it that way, kid.” Tasuki said evenly. “But you ain’t wrong. From a tactical perspective, it’s one less enemy we have to worry about.”

“I guess I ain’t much of a soldier, then, if I can’t see it tactically.” Maichu said bitterly, and Tasuki grinned, shaking his head.

“You seem like a damn good one to me.” He reflected. “Your principles an’ your heart are in the right place, after all. Hatin’ your duty is fine, so long as you do it. An’ you did… so I guess that means you ain’t such a kid after all. You’ll come to realise that, I guess, as time goes on. That for Kutou’s sake, you made a sacrifice. An’ if you really want to help your country, that’s what you might have to do again. That’s what it means, in the end… these things ain’t easy pathways.”

He got to his feet, pulling his companion up with him.

“I saw four friends die.” he continued. “One sacrificed his life to heal those who had been injured. One stabbed himself to take down the enemy that had possessed him. One died in the snows, just too late for us to have helped him. And one martyred himself in battle, trying to protect the country he had been raised to govern. All of those times there was nothin’ I could do to stop it. An’ I hated that… I hated it more’n anything. But in the end, the only thing we could do was go on. For Kounan’s sake… for their sake. An’ you have to think the same way. Aoiketsu told me this Kayu was patronised by the Priest we’re fightin’ against — so more than likely he was a puppet doin’ his mentor’s bidding. If you want to be pissed at someone, be pissed at the one pullin’ the strings… pull yourself together an’ focus on avengin’ your buddy. His death ain’t your fault — it was a consequence of other things. You have to focus an’ help to take out the one responsible.”

“Kikei.” Maichu’s eyes narrowed, and he clenched his fists, nodding his head.

“You’re right.” He murmured. “Kikei must’ve sent Kayu — Kikei is the one who’s done all of this. To Hyoushin-sama, to us… everything. And it’s his fault Kayu was blind… its his fault Kayu attacked Hyoushin. I hate what I’ve done right now, but I guess I have to focus that into fighting against the one behind this. Then maybe I’ll feel better about it — if I’m able to avenge Kayu’s death.”

“That’s more the spirit.” Tasuki looked approving. “Listen. Myoume said that you should stop here with us for now — if you don’t want to go back an’ face Aoi an’ the others, then that’s no problem with me. But you will have to face them — so work on gettin’ your head straight, huh? Noone here will blame you for doin’ somethin’ you had to do. Reikaku-zan doesn’t work that way, after all. I’ve told you how I think about it an’ so has Shishi, so you know we ain’t on your case. But dwellin’ on it won’t solve anythin’. So since you’re here, you can help out with some mountain tasks an’ work off your feelin’s a little that way. So long as you’re here, noone will worry about you. An’ tomorrow, we’ll see what the day brings. Okay?”

“Okay.” Maichu’s expression flickered with faint relief. “Thank you, Tasuki-san. I guess I’m not ready to go back… yet.”

“Then you can come help me cut wood.” Shishi grabbed him by the hand. “You’re strong enough an’ it’s boring when there’s only one. Jin used to do it with me — but he ain’t here, so you’ll do instead.”

“I’ll leave him to you then, kid.” Tasuki nodded approvingly. “A few swings of the axe might shake some sense into him, after all. I’ll

go reassure Myoume that their stray turned up safe and sound here and that we'll keep him for the time being."

He eyed Maichu for a moment, then nodded.

"Chin up, kid. You're strong and you'll get past this." He said softly. "You're the type who'll blame yourself more'n anyone else'll blame you, an' that's a fact… you an' me, we ain't different that way, so I can see it all too clearly on your face. But give it some time an' get some perspective — all right? An' in the meantime, put those feelings into finishing what you came here to do… after all, your Emperor is countin' on you."

With that he was gone, and Maichu sighed, rubbing his eyes as a sudden sense of weariness rushed through him.

"Are you coming?" Shishi demanded, and he glanced at her, nodding his head.

"Yeah." He agreed. "Shishi… I…"

"Don't." Shishi held up her hand. "Jus' listen. More you babble about it, more annoying you're goin' to get. Swallow it, okay? You heard the Kashira an' he's right. So listen an' take it on board… cos right now there are some logs with your name on at the back of the mountain."

Maichu paused, glancing back at Jin's memorial with a pensive look on his face.

"I never thought about it, when that guy died." He admitted. "He was just an enemy — I never thought about his family. But… you're it. You an' Tasuki-san. Yet you keep goin' forwards… an' you've let us into your trust, even though your buddy was killed by someone who aligns himself with Kutou. What you said about a war… I don't think it is, yet. Because Tasuki-san is right. We're on the same side an' there are folk countin' on us."

"Jin was a pretty smart kind of guy, and he'd tell you to snap out of it, too." Shishi told him firmly. "But I guess that's the difference between a soldier and a bandit. A bandit does what he has to — or she — no matter what."

"I don't think it's all that different." Maichu glanced at his hands. "Do you know how long it's been since I friggin' shed tears? Not since I was a kid back home with my family, an' my brother ran the cart over my feet. Yet…"

"Losin' a friend is always shit, no matter what they do." Shishi said

gravely. “You’ve forgiven this Kayu for what he did, haven’t you? Even though he betrayed you first, you ain’t mad at him.”

“No.” Maichu realised. “I’m really not… I just… I feel like I’m the bad guy. Not him.”

“If you can forgive him, you gotta forgive yourself, too.” Shishi said simply. “Else you’ll be friggin’ useless to everyone else, won’t you?”

She gave his arm an impatient tug.

“Come on. This way.” She added. “Right now you can forget about it and help me instead.”

“Shishi, you have some kind of magic — don’t you?” Maichu questioned. “Like your Pa… when you let me out of the cell, you used it. Didn’t you?”

“I suppose.” Shishi looked surprised. “Though it ain’t entirely mine. It’s Doryoku. Genbu’s mage. She an’ I have kinda become buddies… in a closer sense of the word than we anticipated.”

She held up her right hand.

“That band is Genbu’s relic, an’ it’s sort of attached itself to me, so Doryoku’s magic can work through me an’ my sword.” She continued. “It’s friggin’ strong, too, when it wants to be… an’ I’m sort of afraid to use it to fight, since I don’t want to hurt someone by mistake just by losin’ my temper. But I’m startin’ to get a hold of it, I think. What I did to let you out… that was pretty controlled, after all.”

“Doryoku, huh.” Maichu frowned. “If she’s anything like Suiko or Kitora, you’d do better throwin’ that thing off a cliff, Shishi. Believe me.”

“Well, Do-nee’s not hostile.” Shishi shook her head. “Intrusive, maybe, but not psycho. But you’ve met both o’ the other mages properly, haven’t you?”

“Yes.” Maichu agreed. “Why?”

“Then that’s what you can tell me about, while we’re cuttin’ wood.” Shishi decided. “Kitora an’ Suiko. Because Hisei said we had to disable their magic if Hiki was goin’ to be able to raise Seiryuu. An’ you’re the one who knows best what they’re like — so you can make yourself useful an’ tell me everything you know so that Do-nee and I are prepared for when we leave. It’s better than fretting over something you can’t change, and Aoi an’ the rest will forgive you for those things in any case, I’m sure of it. Like Papa said, they will more quickly than you will, so you should turn your mind to other things, right?”

“It doesn’t bother you, then, that I killed someone today?” Maichu eyed her hesitantly, and Shishi snorted.

“What do you think I am, a little kid?” She demanded disparagingly. “Don’t be stupid. You make it sound like you went out and murdered someone — an’ if you’d done that, I’d have issue with you. But this is somethin’ else — besides, do you think that livin’ on the mountain, noone’s ever been killed? You’re naive if you think that way — Reikaku-zan’s bandits may protect the people round here, but they don’t show any mercy to Kaou-zan’s thugs or anyone who tries to cause trouble in these parts.”

“I guess.” Maichu thought this over carefully, then,

“Have you ever done it?”

“Killed in Reikaku-zan’s name?” Shishi looked surprised. “No. But I would, if Papa would let me near battle. He’s always been a bit protective, though — an’ Jin was always there, anyway. But I’m not afraid to fight. Not to protect the place I call home… be it Kounan or Reikaku-zan.”

“I was pretty stupid before, wasn’t I?” Maichu pursed his lips. “You even said it, when we first came down the mountain — about how naive it was to jump into life as a soldier with all these dreams an’ shit. I thought I knew what the deal was, that’s all — but… I didn’t realise how much was at stake, or how much we’d have to do to get to a point where Kutou could even be free. But today it hit home.”

He sighed, glancing down at his hands.

“For that freedom, I’ve killed a man. A man who was my friend.” He said softly. “It’s not just about fightin’ an unidentified enemy — people have names an’ faces an’ lives — people like your Jin. This time it was a name and a face I knew that crossed the line, an’ I had to… for Kutou’s sake… didn’t I? But it might be… that way again. If I’m really committed to Kutou an’ the Emperor, I may… I may have to kill more people I know and like. Mightn’t I? If they’re as duped as Kayu was.”

He shut his eyes briefly, remembering the confrontation in Hokkan and Hyoushin’s subsequent disappearance into the snow.

“They didn’t fight against the Commander’s deposition. Only Aoi an’ I have.” He murmured. “So it could happen… that I’ll spill the blood of more friends before this is over. An’ I don’t know… if I can handle that. Even if it is my duty to, Shishi… I don’t know… if I can.”

“Well, that’s fine.” Shishi offered him a rueful grin. “So don’t panic

about it. If it's that way, point them towards my sword instead. I don't have anything to hold me back. Kutou's soldiers mean nothing to me, after all."

She paused, eying him thoughtfully for a moment.

"I guess, you and Aoi are excepted, since you've got the sense to realise we ain't the enemy." She amended. "But otherwise, if they're idiots, they're fair game. So don't worry about shit that might not happen yet. You an' Aoi ain't goin' into this battle alone. We're all goin' together. And we're goin' to win — no matter what. For Jin's sake — hell, even for Kayu's, if you like. We're goin' to put an end to all this shit once an' for all… an' we're goin' to do it *together*."

"So Maichu's on Reikaku-zan?"

As Myoume stepped inside the Ri family home, Chichiri offered her a relieved smile, shutting the door behind her as he did so. "I'm glad you managed to find him, Myoume — if his spirits are as wrenched as they appear to be…"

"He's very confused and upset, because I can feel it a mile away." Myoume said frankly. "But I spoke to Tasuki and he said he and Shishi'd kick sense into him. It seemed the right thing to do — after all, Maichu's a direct soul, and so is Tasuki. I think that the bandit approach might be the best one at the moment."

"Yes." Chichiri looked thoughtful. "I think you're right. Tasuki's as you say — direct and straight down the line. He'll leave the boy in no doubt about the situation, and he'll speak from his own experience. It's a good thought — especially when we don't have time for Maichu to properly grieve for his friend's death."

He spread his hands, a regretful look in his ruby gaze.

"Aidou's prepared everything for him to be buried." He added. "Later this evening, when the sun has gone down, I'll do it myself. I'll cast Suzaku's blessing over him, too. It makes me sad, and angry too, Myoume. Kayu might have been wrong but he was just a young man manipulated by greater power. Hyoushin's said the same… he really wanted to prevent this because of that fact."

"I wish I'd been able to, as well." Myoume looked guilty. "But I knew too late exactly how things were going to be. By the time I got to the clearing, they were already in the heat of battle..and there was nothing to be done to separate them."

"And Maichu's aim is true." Chichiri agreed. "I saw the body… one

clean blow to the heart, no mistake about it. An inch either way and Kayu might have lived — but Maichu knew where he was aiming and instinct drove him to do what he'd been taught to do. The one thing is that I don't believe Kayu knew much about it. He would have been dead the moment the blade pierced his heart."

"Yes." Myoume frowned. "Small mercy though it is."

She sighed, rubbing her temples.

"At least Maichu's own life doesn't seem to be in danger imminently." She added. "I was worried — his spirits were so unsettled when he left the scene that I thought he might try and hurt himself — after all, he's an impulsive young soul. But I think Tasuki and Shishi will prevent that, now."

"Yes." Chichiri pursed his lips. "I had that thought too."

"Hyoushin and Aoiketsu are all right, I trust?"

"Hyoushin has slept most of the afternoon — under duress — and I've managed to keep him resting since he woke up. I even talked him into eating something this evening." Chichiri nodded. "Aidou prepared some fish, vegetables and rice for him and he's working his way through it as well as can be expected when his usual arm is incapacitated. He won't accept help, though, so I've let him get on with it at his own speed. At least he's eating, which is a step forward. As for Aoi…"

He frowned.

"You said something to me about Seiryuu's seal and Aoi's dislike of blood." He murmured. "Hyoushin and I both think… that's gone now. Kayu's death has broken through it. He seems all right, but… I don't know. There's an anger simmering in his spirit, too. And something else… something stronger."

"Nakago." Myoume sighed. "Yes, I can feel it too. I thought you'd probably have noticed. Still, like I said before, I don't know how I feel regarding that. I really think that I've pushed him towards Hikari and into this situation so much to bring this about. To break that seal and turn him into a proper soldier. I can't be sure, but with Kayu's death being something I saw… if I'd thought about it carefully, I might have reasoned out sooner what it meant. And I say that I wanted to prevent it — but Chichiri, honestly, I didn't even think about trying. I knew when I stepped into the clearing what would happen — I saw it as clear as if it had already happened, Maichu's blade striking through Kayu's body and him falling to the ground. Yet even though Hyoushin

was ready to kill himself to try and separate them — all I did was tell him it was hopeless and hold him back. My drive was to protect *him* from hurting himself — not to worry about preserving Kayu."

"You're not going to feel guilt for the boy's death too, are you?" Chichiri asked softly, and Myoume shrugged.

"As it happens, I *did* know too late to change it." She said frankly. "And my power probably wouldn't have done any good, even if I had tried to come between them. But I do wonder, if I'd known earlier… what I would have done. So long as Kayu is dead, there's no chance of him leaking information back to the East. I'm sorry for Maichu and Aoi — and for Hyoushin, too. Even for Kayu himself. But everything is panning out in the way Byakko's told me so far — overall, I… don't think it's a bad thing that this happened. And now Kayu is dead… I can see… a little more clearly what our path ahead is. The cold hard truth is that Kayu's life was expendable when it came to the big picture. Aoi's, Hyoushin's — they're not. But Kayu… wasn't important. And so… really… it was the lesser of evils for it to end that way."

She grimaced.

"Does that make me a terrible person?"

"No." Chichiri shook his head gravely. "As a Seishi, I understand what a bigger picture can mean. Sometimes we're driven to do inexplicable things for the Gods we were born to serve — even things that seem incomprehensible to those around us."

"I'm glad you understand it from that point of view." Myoume admitted. "It makes me feel a little less cold and sinister, if I know that someone else sees it from my perspective."

"I've been known to manipulate situations myself, in the past." Chichiri owned. "Sometimes, for this world… things have to happen the way they do, after all."

He frowned.

"But I'm grieved for Kayu's death." He added. "Because that young boy will have to carry it with him for the rest of his life — and that in itself isn't fair."

"No…" Myoume agreed. 'No, I agree. Poor Maichu… I never saw anyone quite so shattered before. That's why I asked Tasuki to take him in hand. I really felt it was the best thing… somehow. Especially since I think… Maichu's purpose in all of this has now been fulfilled. That his sole role in protecting Kutou was to come here and kill the soldier known as Hei Kayu, to preserve the life of Tou Hyoushin — the

Meihi "Lilaihi'. If that is the case, I thought that he should have a chance to recover from it. At least, it doesn't matter if he wants to come back East with us or not, when we go. If he wants to hide on the mountain — so be it. His duty here is done, after all."

"A hunch?" Chichiri asked quizzically, and Myoume snorted ruefully.

"As much as I trust those at present." She agreed acerbically. "Yes. Somehow it seemed to be the right place for him to be. Though he arrived there unconsciously of his own accord — I'm sure it wasn't a coincidence. One of the Gods guided his steps there… just another thing in the big puzzle that's starting to make itself clearer in my mind's eye."

"Which leaves us with things to settle, doesn't it?" Chichiri asked, and Myoume nodded.

"Many things." She agreed. "Kayu's death clarified a few things for me. Hyoushin must face his Emperor again, because he's the only one who can. I know that for sure now — he's the only one who might talk Kintsusei-sama around. That's why I was so driven to protect him today."

"The *only* reason, Myoume?" Chichiri raised an eyebrow, and the prophet sighed.

"Byakko only knows what connection I have to that man." She admitted. "Only that one exists, and has fated us to meet time and time again. But yes, for the time being. Besides, I don't think it matters beyond all of this. My next meeting with my brother will be the encounter that divides us forever. I know now, more clearly than ever that we will face each other in Kutou — in the Imperial Chamber, and one of us will die. Miramu is the assassin — and I know I will not kill my brother. So the outcome is clear. I'm bringing things closer to a conclusion — not just for Kutou, but for myself, as well. I may help save this world, Chichiri, with all my meddling. But I don't expect to be alive to see the result."

"That's not something you can change?" Chichiri looked grave. "It seems a shame… when you've worked so hard, just to give up."

"I don't seek to escape it." Myoume shook her head. "With all the work I've put in to manipulate others into making my sight become reality, I won't shy away from my own destiny. That's how it will be, and I will face it. But until I do, my job is to try and help guide the rest of them — and to make sure Hyoushin survives as far as Kutou. Not just him, either. Hikari is Seiryuu's Priestess, just as Hisei

confirmed. And… if we can get there… if we can get past Kikei… Seiryuu's ally will be waiting for us. One whose involvement might just turn the scale."

"Seiryuu's… ally?" Chichiri eyed her keenly, and Myoume reddened, shaking her head as if to clear it.

"Toroki again." She murmured. "I'm sorry. I don't know what it means. It just… slipped out."

"Then maybe you'd do better to come with me, and we can talk things over together." Chichiri suggested. "Hikari and Aoi are with Hyoushin and since Maichu's staying on the mountain, we were just waiting for you to get back. Aidou's taken the children to Souun to the market to fetch a few things, and they're not yet back. We can talk freely without fear of scaring the young ones."

"You have a plan, don't you?" Myoume asked, and Chichiri shrugged.

"Perhaps." He said cautiously. "But there's a lot that needs to be talked about first."

"Isn't there always." Myoume sighed, but obediently followed him through the hallways to the back chamber which had become Hyoushin's makeshift sick room. The Meihi was sitting up in bed, robed in nightclothes with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders to protect his fevered form from the cooling air. His thick silver hair fell loose over his back, and a wooden tray lay across the bedcovers, confirming Chichiri's words about Aidou's food preparation. At their entrance he glanced up, setting down his chopsticks as he offered them a quizzical glance.

"Maichu?" He asked softly, and Myoume nodded.

"He's not with me, but he's safe." She replied, sinking down on the end of the bed. "So don't look worried, Hyoushin — it's not good for you. Tasuki and Shishi have him, and he's going to stay there tonight. I think he needs that headspace — and we think Tasuki is probably the best person to handle him in this condition."

"He'll be all right, though, won't he?" Aoiketsu demanded, and Myoume shrugged.

"He's not physically hurt." She said simply. "His mental scars… I can't judge those. That's up to him."

"Damn Kikei." Aoiketsu clenched his fists, anger glittering in his blue eyes. "I swear, if I ever come within a few feet of that fat old

Priest…”

“Aoi-kun, stop it.” Hikari chided, anxiety on her face. “I know you’re cross, but…”

“We need to go to Kutou.” Aoiketsu cut across her, glancing at Chichiri for confirmation. “We have to avenge this, before more people get hurt!”

“Calm down, Aoi.” Myoume scolded. “Hikari’s right. Rushing into anything isn’t the answer.”

“But we can’t do anything sat around here!”

“No, we can’t.” Chichiri agreed. “Still, if we let a hot-headed young soldier charge in, don’t you think there’ll be more blood spilt?”

“Yes. Kikei’s.” Aoiketsu’s gaze hardened. “I’m serious, Chichiri. I’m not going to let him get away with this. Miramu either. I don’t care if he is Myoume’s brother. I want to kill him and Kikei both, for messing with us. I’m fed up with people I care about being hurt or killed because of their games. It’s time they stopped, and I want to put a stop to them.”

“Aoi.” Hyoushin said sharply, and Aoiketsu’s head jerked up, staring at his Commander in surprise.

“Hyoushin-sama…?”

“Stop this. Now.” Hyoushin’s expression held reproach, and he shook his head. “I will not tolerate it… calm yourself, else you will not go to Kutou at all.”

Aoiketsu’s eyes widened, and a faint smile touched Chichiri’s lips.

“Well, and that almost sounded like a father scolding his son, you know.” He mused.

“You’ve never called me Aoi before.” Aoiketsu’s brow furrowed in confusion, and Hyoushin nodded.

“As your Commander, there is always the need for distinction of rank and position, and favouritism must not be permitted.” He said softly. “You were in my charge, after all, and abbreviations are inappropriate in that situation. This time I am not speaking to you as your Commander, but as the man who taught you values in this life. I wanted you to heed me. Speaking so rashly — and before Myoume, whose brother you just swore to strike down — stop and consider your words before you speak. I didn’t teach you to be reckless, after all. Did I?”

Aoiketsu gaped, and Hikari reached over to squeeze his hand.

“Hyoushin-san is right. Calm down.” She begged. “You’ve been tense and angry since this morning, and it’s not like you. I don’t know what to do with you when you’re like this — you’re not like the Aoi I love at all.”

Aoiketsu groaned, burying his head in his hands.

“I’m sorry.” He murmured. “I just… Maichu’s expression… I know how he’s feeling. How he must feel. And I hate that. It’s bad enough that Kayu’s dead… but dammit, in that situation I’d have struck him through as well. But I wasn’t there in time to do anything… and Maichu’s the one who’s got to carry it instead. He’s such a loyal person — and he and Kayu were always closer friends than Kayu and I were. This is really going to hurt Maichu — a lot. And I hate that. I*hate* it!”

“So do we.” Chichiri said gravely. “And for that reason I think that going to Kutou is definitely something that shouldn’t be delayed.”

“But Hyoushin can’t ride in this condition!” Myoume protested, anxiety flaring in her indigo eyes. “He’d never survive the journey, even if he could grasp the reins!”

“That decision is mine to make, not yours.” Hyoushin said quietly. “You said yourself that I must face my Emperor. So I must.”

“But if you leave like this, you won’t survive the journey.” Myoume said desperately. “You’re not strong enough to ride anywhere — don’t you realise that?”

“Of course I realise it.” Hyoushin said impatiently. “This morning made it clear precisely how weak I currently am. But even so, I must do what I must do. I am not afraid to die in my Emperor’s name… and I believe my will is great enough to hold out until I have spoken to him. I am determined, even if I die. We must go to Kutou, and we must go soon.”

“Tomorrow was my plan.” Chichiri admitted, and Myoume stared at him in horror.

“Tomorrow?” She echoed. “Are you serious? Even with him hurt like this?”

“It’s the Commander’s decision, like he just told you.” Aoiketsu said evenly. “Not yours, Myoume.”

“It’s all right.” Chichiri held up his hands. “I don’t anticipate anyone riding anywhere. But the situation has become grave if

soldiers are appearing on the mountain. Tasuki and I might yet have to repel more would-be treasure hunters, and so we can't come to the East with you — although I wish we could. That said, however, I can probably go one way. And if I was to take you all into my *kasa*, then there'd be no long journey or any need for Hyoushin to get on a horse. I could transport you to somewhere in the vicinity of Kutou's capital — after all, I'm more than a little familiar with the Eastern lands. It would be one way of looking at it."

"The*kasa*?" Hikari's eyes widened. "Oh!"

"You could really take all of us so far?" Aoiketsu stared at him. "Your magic is strong enough?"

"Yes." Chichiri agreed. "I've done it before, with my Seishi brethren. It's not hard, you know. And even if I can't stay and fight, it would be something I could do. That is, if you're all agreeable to submitting to my spells."

"It seems like a viable solution." Hyoushin's expression became one of relief. "Thank you, Chichiri. If you can do so, it appears to be the best answer to the problem."

"In which case, it's settled, you know?" Chichiri responded. "Tomorrow, to Kutou. Although…"

He paused, glancing at Hyoushin.

"I expect you to sleep well tonight, and eat as good a breakfast as any of us before we leave." He said firmly. "Because unless your fever is down, I won't take you anywhere."

"Yes, sensei." A wry twinkle entered Hyoushin's amethyst eyes. "Haven't I already kept my word once today? I understand your conditions and I accept them. I will not be missing from the party."

"Good." Chichiri nodded. "Then tomorrow morning we'll head up to the mountain and get Shishi… Maichu too, if he's feeling up to coming along. And we'll make for Kutou."

"The grounds of the Kaiga estate seems as good a place as any to aim for." Hyoushin said thoughtfully, and Aoiketsu started, staring at him in disbelief.

"The Kaiga estate?" He repeated. "But Sir, you were…"

"A slave there. Yes." Hyoushin agreed evenly. "But despite that, I think it would be adequate. It is not too far from the capital — and Chichiri has already commented on Kikei's spells, so going directly to the city itself may be dangerous. I think it would be a good place —

since noone lives there now."

"If that's how you feel." Chichiri eyed the Meihi keenly. "Then that can be done, you know. I've been there before and I know where to head. And you know better than me the landscape of Kutou."

"Then that's what we'll do." Hyoushin sank back against his pillows. "Tomorrow morning."

His gaze flitted across to Aoiketsu, and he pursed his lips.

"Aoiketsu, I do not want you to forget yourself on this trip." He said softly. "No matter how cross you are with the circumstances… do you understand?"

"Forget myself?" Aoiketsu repeated, and Hyoushin nodded.

"This desire for revenge is not characteristic of your nature, and you must get a hold on it before it puts you or others in danger." He said evenly.

Despite himself Aoiketsu reddened, lowering his gaze.

"I'm just angry." He defended himself. "Aren't you?"

"Of course." Hyoushin agreed. "But even so…"

He hesitated, then,

"You are Kaiga Aoiketsu." He continued carefully. "Not Gi Ayuru. I want you to preserve that distinction."

"Gi Ayuru?" Hikari whitened. "*Nakago*? What do you mean, Hyoushin-san? What do you think's happening to Aoi?"

"Kayu's blood didn't bother me." Aoiketsu's expression became troubled. "Even though I didn't have the *shinken* — that's what you mean, isn't it, sir? That I've nothing to stop me getting carried away with things, if I'm no longer going to pass out at the sight of blood."

"You have one thing, and that's your own will." Chichiri said gently. "We don't know how much of Nakago's spirit is running through you, Aoi, or how much influence it might or might not have on your actions. But you've not grown up the way he did — and that's something important for you to keep in mind. As Hyoushin said — you're not Gi Ayuru. You're Kaiga Aoiketsu."

"I know that." Aoiketsu admitted. "I can't be anyone else, at the end of the day. Kaiga Aoiketsu is who I've always been raised to be."

"Yes. Your own man." Hyoushin agreed. "I believe you're strong enough to govern any elements of your father's resentment that might

stir within you — but even for something that seems right and just, I want you to stop and consider your actions. I do not want you to do something you regret."

Aoiketsu glanced at his hands. Slowly he nodded.

"I understand." He murmured. "And I'll do my best. I know… what you're talking about. I can feel it… something inside of me that's angry and burning to rip to shreds the people who've hurt those I care about. But you're right… I haven't been taught to fight that way. And I'm not going to let it take over me. I'm not going to mess up, Commander. I promise. I'm going to protect Hikari and save Kutou — I'm not going to make the same mistakes my father made."

"Hikari will need her own strength too, however." Chichiri pursed his lips. "Hikari-chan, how much do you know about Seiryuu — and Hongou Yui's raising of him over Sairou?"

"Not enough, probably." Hikari admitted. "I guess there's some kind of spell — but I haven't really thought much about it. Why?"

"Because Seiryuu is an exceptionally strong spiritual force." Myoume said quietly. "You saw how just a little of Doryoku's power almost severed Shishi's soul from her body, in the shrine in Hokkan. Doryoku is simply a mage spirit — the God that gave her that power is infinitely stronger. And that's just Genbu — Seiryuu is the God known as the fighting dragon — of all of them, perhaps, the most difficult to tame."

"Meaning what, exactly?" Hikari asked anxiously. "Don't I already have something of a God inside of me? I mean, won't Suzaku help?"

"You'll need to use that, probably, to raise Seiryuu. That and the other treasures, like Hisei said." Chichiri confirmed. "But what Myoume means is…"

He hesitated, then he sighed.

"There's no easy way to tell you." He admitted. "If not for your mother, Yui would have been entirely consumed by Seiryuu's spirit. As she made her wishes, she was little by little devoured by him. Had Miaka not wished for her to be safely returned, Yui would have ceased to be… she would have been destroyed by the God's strength."

"Devoured?" Aoiketsu's eyes almost fell out of his head. "Shit… but that… you think that could happen… to Hikari?"

"That depends on Hikari." Chichiri admitted. "Miaka was strong enough to withstand Suzaku's demands on her body, after all. She

didn't get devoured — she survived, conquered it and since then was able to use her connection to the God to save Kounan again. But that was Suzaku — a much more understanding God in many ways. Not that Seiryuu is a malignant force — but… they are different. Well, you only have to look at the lands they protect."

"Am I really in that much danger?" Hikari looked frightened. "If I raise Seiryuu — is it going to *kill* me?"

"There's a fifty percent chance… given past history… that you could be… hurt." Myoume admitted. "Okuda Takiko and Hongou Yui were not strong enough to hold off the God's spirits and if not for outside interference, they would have been devoured. Yuuki Miaka and Ousugi Suzuno-sama fought off the lure of the Beast God's magic and survived intact. The difference seems to be a matter of strength."

"But… Yui-san and Takiko-sama survived, didn't they?" Hikari said softly. "In the end, because people helped them."

"Okuda Takiko was slain by her father to prevent her from being engulfed by Genbu." Chichiri said soberly. "Miaka told me that her brother had found evidence of that in her world — that she'd returned only to take the curse with her. No, Hikari — I don't think you can rely on outside protection. From Aoi or anyone else. They can get you to that point — and I'm sure they'll do everything they can to do that. But like us Seishi couldn't do Miaka's duty for her — in the end, it lies with you."

"And that's why I need to get stronger?" Hikari whispered, tears glittering in her eyes. "Or I'll be a sacrifice for Kutou?"

"It's my opinion that you already possess strength, Hikari-san." Hyoushin said evenly.

"But enough of it to… do something like that?" Aoiketsu bit his lip. "Can… can she? Really?"

"In the end, it's up to her." Myoume spread her hands. "To give her heart and soul to raising the Dragon — to jump into it unreservedly with the resolve and will to save the land, no matter what risk to herself… that's what a Miko needs to have. Any doubt, any hesitation — those are the cracks that weakness seeps into. I've no doubt you've enough spirit, Hikari — just as Hyoushin says. But rallying it is what's important. When it comes to it… that's something only you'll be able to decide."

Hikari was silent for a moment. Then she reached up to dash her tears away, nodding her head.

“I keep saying I’m sick of being protected, and that I want to do more to help.” She said bravely, her voice shaking slightly as she fought against her emotions. “So I’ll go and I’ll do my best. After all, my mother was strong enough. And so many things have already happened… so many sacrifices… Jin, and now Kayu, too. Hyoushin-san got hurt. Meikyo, too. Everyone else has suffered for this. I… I won’t run away from it. I promised Jin that I’d not do that, and so I guess I’ll have to just find the strength somehow. Whatever happens… I can’t turn tail and flee. So I guess we’re going to go to Kutou and raise Seiryuu — whatever it takes to do it.”

Chapter 21

Chapter Twenty

“You know, considering you’re a soldier, you really are pretty shit at early mornings.”

Shishi dropped down beside Maichu’s makeshift pallet, giving him a rough shake as she gazed at him impatiently. “Wake up, will you, you idiot? Obviously you’re feeling better, if you can snore your way through sunrise like this.”

“Shishi?” Maichu blinked, staring at her in confusion as he struggled into a sitting position. He gazed around him, and the young bandit could tell that he was assessing his surroundings as if seeing them for the first time. Shishi sighed, shaking her head.

“You’re lost, aren’t you?” She said disparagingly. “Honestly… men are friggin’ useless if you leave them to their own devices. You’re on Reikaku-zan. Remember? You came here yesterday, an’ you helped me cut wood — so Kashira fed you an’ gave you somewhere to sleep for the night.”

“Kashira…” Maichu faltered, then a troubled look touched his dark eyes, and Shishi knew that his memory of the previous day’s events had returned. Slowly he nodded his head.

“I remember.” He said softly. “Yesterday… Kayu and I fought, didn’t we? It seems like it was a dream, right now — a nightmare. But it wasn’t one at all, was it? It really happened.”

“It really did.” Shishi told him frankly. “But that was yesterday. Today’s a different day… an’ people are waitin’ for you to drag yourself outta bed.”

“People?” Maichu looked blank, and Shishi groaned, grabbing him around the wrists and hauling him to his feet.

“Chichiri’s come to see you.” She said frankly. “Us too, as it happens. About going to Kutou. He said you didn’t have to come if you don’t want to — but Kashira told him he didn’t think you were a coward who runs away, an’ he was right, wasn’t he? You ain’t goin’ to chicken out of it?”

“Chichiri is?” Maichu frowned, then, “If it’s Kutou, I haven’t got a choice, have I? I have to see this through now. I’ve gone too far to

turn back or run away."

He brushed himself down, reaching up to pull his thick, unruly hair back into its usual queue.

"I'm coming."

"Good." Approval flickered in Shishi's bright bronze eyes. "Then get a move on, will you? From what Chichiri said, we're not hanging around — we're leaving today, if its at all possible."

"Today?" Maichu paused, staring at her in surprise, and Shishi nodded.

"With the soldiers turnin' up here, we can't waste any more time." She said soberly. "Before it turns into a full blown war between Kutou an' Kounan again, we haveta do somethin'. So that's what we're doin'. We're goin' to Kutou."

"But the Commander…"

"Chichiri's got a way around that." Shishi assured him. "Now come on already, will you! Geez — you're so slow! How the hell has Aoi coped with roomin' with you for six years? Shit, does he have to drag you out of bed every damn morning to make inspection?"

"No… actually it's usually the other way, back home." Maichu admitted ruefully. "But since we started skippin' all over the place — ah, I don't know. Guess it's skewed with my body clock or somethin'. Though I didn't think I'd sleep last night, t'be honest."

"That's why I made you cut so much wood." Shishi said frankly, as they made their way along the narrow passageway that led to the main core of the bandit's hideout. "Because I knew it'd wear you out. You soldiers ain't as tough as us bandits, after all — so I figured it'd be the easiest way."

Surprise glittered in Maichu's expression, followed by gratitude, and Shishi was glad to see the faint hint of a smile touch his lips.

"Then I guess thanks for that." He said honestly. "I feel a little better for having got some rest. T'be honest, travellin' like we did an' then bein' thrust into the middle of all this — I ain't been sleepin' quite right for a few days now. Worryin' about the Commander, too… I guess I was more tired than I thought."

He rubbed his temples.

"Maybe that's why my judgement was so shot to hell yesterday. Whatever happened, Shishi, I only meant to disarm him. You know

that, right?"

"So you keep sayin', an' quite frankly I'm sick of hearin' it." Shishi told him bluntly. "Noone thinks you killed the guy in cold blood, you know. An' most people on Reikaku-zan would fight to the death to protect the Kashira, if need be. It's the same thing. Even if he was your buddy. That's how it is."

"I know, I know." Maichu sighed. "All right. I'm with you."

"At that moment they reached the Kashira's quarters, and Shishi rapped smartly on the door, waiting for the familiar sound of her father's voice to call them in. It soon came, and she pushed back the thick planked partition, dragging her companion with her as she stepped into the chamber.

"He's half asleep, but here he is." She said frankly. "Next time someone else can wake him. I swear, I was inches away from drawin' the sword on him an' tryin' that."

Maichu cast her an annoyed glance, and Tasuki pursed his lips, eying them both thoughtfully. Then he shrugged.

"He's up. That's enough for me." He said evenly. "Chichiri's here, kid. He wants to talk t'you about Kutou — you up for that?"

"Yes." Maichu nodded his head. "Though I don't understand how we could be leaving today. We can't go without the Commander, surely? And riding…"

"That's all right, you know. He doesn't have to ride." Chichiri himself spoke at that moment, pushing back the curtain that divided the front of the bandit's quarters from the alcove beyond. "And you're quite decided about coming with us too, Maichu? Even despite yesterday's ordeal — you still mean to come?"

Maichu looked startled for a moment. Then he nodded.

"*Because* of it, I have to." He said briefly. "That's all."

Chichiri's expression became one of comprehension and he smiled.

"I'm glad to hear it." He said softly. "Tasuki said he didn't think you were a coward, and he's usually a good judge where men are concerned. I'm glad he was right. I think we'll need all the help we can get, especially since Tasuki and I… can't really go with you. At least… not properly."

"We're sort of used to that." Shishi clambered onto the window-sill, crossing her legs and hugging her knees to her as she eyed her uncle

resignedly. “But you *are* coming with us part way at least, aren’t you? I mean, you said when you got here that you were goin’ to use the*kasa* to get us there — right?”

“That’s the current plan, yes.” Chichiri agreed. “I’m pretty sure that I can manage it, and Hyoushin’s already told me where the best place is to go. So I thought I’d come here and get you and Maichu — if Maichu was coming — and we’d be able to plan accordingly. Tasuki’s going to keep an eye to the village while I’m away, so even if Miramu is still lurking somewhere in the South, he won’t be able to cause any more harm.”

“I almost hope he*is* lurkin’ here.” Tasuki said meaningfully, his fingers brushing against the end of the tessen. “It’s hot enough for a good barbeque an’ western assassin seems a damn fine main course from where I’m standin’.”

“Don’t rush into anything reckless.” Chichiri cautioned. “I know you want to avenge Jin, Tasuki-kun — but remember Anzu would cry if anything happened to you.”

“I’m not an idiot, you know.” Tasuki retorted. “I ain’t still a teenager an’ I don’t need you to tell me. I’ll be careful… yeesh. But if he crosses my path, I won’t be steppin’ back an’ lettin’ him by.”

He gestured in his friend’s direction.

“In any case,*you* ought to be takin’ your own advice. I don’t think Oneesan’s reaction would be any prettier than Anzu’s, if you really did make it a one way trip.”

“Touche.” Chichiri tipped his *kasa* mockingly in acknowledgment of his fellow Seishi’s words. “I’ll do that. Don’t worry. After all,*I’m* not a reckless wandering monk any more, either.”

“You were a monk?” Maichu’s jaw dropped, and despite the situation, Chichiri laughed.

“In a manner of speaking, you know.” He said, dismissing it with a flick of his fingers. “The lifestyle suited me at the time, but it was a long time ago now. Things have changed a good deal since then.”

“So what exactly do you mean, then, about us not riding?” Maichu recovered himself, eying the sorcerer quizzically. “There’s a way to do that? Kutou ain’t close, you know — this is closer to Sairou than anywhere, ain’t it?”

“Yes, it is.” Chichiri agreed. “But you already know I’m a sorcerer, don’t you, Maichu? It’s possible for me to use my spell magic and

transport you — and everyone — to a specified location within Kutou's borders. As I said, Hyoushin's already told me the best place to choose. All that's left is to gather some supplies and, of course, all the members of the party."

His expression became shadowed at this point.

"It will be difficult." He added softly. "And dangerous. And though we're taking Seiryuu no Miko into the land which needs her, there's no guaranteeing that people won't try to kill her or us or both when we are there. Hikari is brave, but she's frightened by what is being asked of her — and honestly, I'm frightened *for* her. I remember Seiryuu's devouring of Yui, after all. If she's going to have any chance of succeeding, she needs to be able to find her own strength and focus. Which means that anyone going with her is going to have to be at the top of their game to defend and protect her until the time comes for her to raise the God."

"That suits me." Shishi said frankly. "I already promised myself I wouldn't let anythin' happen to her. An' Do-nee will help. She told me she would. Hiki will be fine, Chichiri. An' we won't let her be devoured. Even if Aoi an' I have to take swords an' cut the dragon to shreds to get her out… we won't let anythin' bad happen to her."

"Maichu?" Tasuki cast the young soldier a keen glance, and Maichu frowned, a troubled glint entering his dark eyes.

"I've gone too far to turn back." He said quietly. "I'm pledged to the Commander — to Seiryuu no Miko… to the Emperor… an' to Kutou. Those are the things I'm fightin' for, an' I'll fight for them. Even if it means I'm killed, or hurt, or… if I'm fightin' my friends. This is what I believe in doin'…and it's too late to turn out yellow about it now."

"Well, so Myoume*was* right after all." Chichiri offered him a smile. "She said that she thought the mountain was the best place for you to be last night, and so it seems to have been. It's all right though, Maichu. You needn't be worried about facing either Hyoushin or Aoi. Both of them are worried about you — Hyoushin was angry that he couldn't prevent what happened, but he's not angry with you. And Aoi is angry with Kikei — but he doesn't blame you for Kayu's death, either. They're soldiers, like you are — and they understand what happened."

Maichu glanced at his hands.

"I wish I did." He admitted. "My memories are blurry — like I went into auto somewhere an' didn't know when to stop. But then, if I had stopped… if I had disarmed him, overpowered him… what then? It

wouldn't have changed anythin'."

He swallowed hard, and Shishi could see the flicker of emotion in his dark eyes.

"I liked Kayu. I still do." He murmured. "But the way he spoke — to me, about the Commander… he wasn't Kayu. Not the man I knew. War changes people. Loyalties do, too. Even though Kikei pulled the strings… it wouldn't have changed it. We wouldn't have talked him round… would we?"

"Unlikely." Chichiri admitted. "Hyoushin told me that Kayu was raised by Kikei just as much as Aoi was raised by him. That kind of loyalty is difficult to break — I think even if Kayu had realised what was going on, he wouldn't have betrayed the man who gave him so much. It's just tragic that Kikei's good deed turned out to be a bad one, in the end."

Maichu frowned, digesting this. Then he nodded.

"What… happened to him?" He asked hesitantly. "I mean… his body. What..?"

"I buried him last night, with Suzaku's blessing." Chichiri said gently. "In the village plot, among the dead of our neighbours and friends. I'm sorry that I can't pray to Seiryuu on his behalf, Maichu — but I thought you'd rather that than anything else. Kayu was a stranger here, but he still had people who cared about him. Aoi came with me to help, and so did Myoume… to send his soul off to somewhere more peaceful than here."

"Maybe he'll get another chance, like Jin." Shishi said evenly. "I mean, since it wasn't his fault he was an idiot, maybe Seiryuu'll help him."

"He's dead, though." Maichu responded doubtfully. "Does that really happen with normal people, as well as Seishi?"

"When I was in danger in the north of Kounan, I saw Jin." Shishi nodded, her gaze softening slightly as she remembered the protective presence that had put itself between her and the aggressor's weapon. "I know it was him — not my imagination. And I know that Suzaku was looking out for him and for me. So I believe it. I think it can happen."

"You *saw* Jin?" Tasuki stared at her, and Shishi nodded.

"It was him, I'm sure." She said firmly.

"But that Jin guy was a martyr to a cause, wasn't he?" Maichu's

eyes became troubled. “Kayu was a traitor. Even if he didn’t mean to be.”

“Either way, it’s over with now.” Tasuki said frankly. “And we move on. Chichiri, I’ll be sure to keep tabs on the village, so you don’t need to worry. Take the kids an’ get goin’, huh? Before this one loses his nerve.”

“I won’t lose my nerve.” Maichu shook his head firmly. “I’m decided. I’m going to Kutou. Even if I don’t like it… I’m goin’.”

“Then that’s enough for me.” Chichiri shrugged, plucking the *kasa* from his head and tossing it into the air. “I’ll see you later today, Tasuki-kun — hopefully with good news to report.”

Before either the bandit or the two youngsters could respond, there was a whoosh of magic and Shishi felt herself swept up once more into the darkness of her uncle’s unusual hat. Before she could begin to feel dizzy, however, they had reached the village, and she picked herself up from the grass outside the farm, holding out a hand to haul the dazed Maichu to his feet.

“Shit.” The soldier managed. “What was that?”

“My Suzaku magic. I told you.” Chichiri grinned at him. “It saves time, you know — and it’s a good introduction. It’ll be a harder trip to Kutou, after all — it’s more than a matter of a few minutes walk.”

“Maichu!” At that moment, the door of the house was flung open, and Aoiketsu hurried outside, casting his friend an anxious glance. “So you were on the mountain, after all! Myoume wouldn’t let any of us come till this morning… but… are you… all right?”

“I ain’t pretending I’m jumpin’ for joy, but I’ll live.” Maichu offered him a rueful smile. “Don’t look like that, Aoi. You look even more like a friggin’ girl with that expression on your face.”

“And I was worried about you!” Aoiketsu protested indignantly, and Shishi laughed.

“No need.” She said frankly. “Turns out he’s made of stronger stuff than all that. He’s coming to Kutou with us — which just leaves us ready to go, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Chichiri pursed his lips thoughtfully. “Come inside, then. I don’t like to use my magic too much within the village — though it’s still early, there are a few locals who aren’t sure what to make of people disappearing into hats and I don’t want to unsettle them. If they think I’m using my Suzaku magic, they might realise that

something's afoot, and it would be better that they didn't know any of what's going on."

"There's nothing any of them can do about it, anyway." Aoiketsu said frankly. "The Commander's awake, by the way. Myoume went to take breakfast to him, and he's kept his word about eating it. I don't know if he should be coming… but he's determined he is, and I can't really argue with him. So…"

"I think it's best that he does go." Chichiri admitted. "Even in this state, if he can turn the scale… if his relationship with the Emperor is as strong as Myoume thinks it is…"

"Hyoushin-sama has always followed Kintsusei-sama's will to the letter." Maichu murmured. "As long as I've known him, anyhow. And I don't think that's changed."

"It's more the Emperor's own position that's uncertain at present." Chichiri pointed out. "Under Kikei's power and guidance, definitely — but we don't know whether he or the Priest really gave the order for Hyoushin's dismissal or execution."

"Yes, we do." Maichu said flatly. "I saw the letter, Chichiri. The one that was sent from the palace to Hokkan. It said that Hyoushin-sama was bein' dismissed based on a report received… but it was all written in that fat old priest's curly stupid script. It was only sealed by the Imperial mark, but I've been thinkin' on that an' considering what you've said about that bastard assassin Miramu, I think that was his doing. I think he stole the seal to give it authenticity… I don't think the Emperor saw the letter at all."

"You think Kikei'd go that far?" Aoiketsu stared at his friend in surprise, and Maichu's expression became dark.

"He sent Kayu here, didn't he?" He said softly. "You didn't see the look in his eyes when I fought him, Aoi. I don't like what I did, but shit, he wasn't… he really intended to kill the Commander, if I hadn't been in the way. That's why I pushed so hard to keep him back. The things he said… it wasn't like he was Kayu. An' it made me think… that Kikei's poisoned him, too. That letter was sent to Kayu, after all. He's been involved in this for a lot longer than we realised. Even than he did, probably."

"Maichu's likely right." Chichiri sighed. "That Kayu was groomed because he was a useful pawn."

Aoiketsu's eyes narrowed.

"When Kikei first brought him into Hyoushin-sama's training

program, he was about twelve or thirteen." He remembered slowly. "And because he was three years older than me, he thought he could lord it over me and stuff… at least to start with. We'd encountered each other before — he was educated at court like I was, and he had a head-start on me, because of the age gap. He was, I suppose, my senpai — and he knew it. But when it came to fighting — it was different. I'd been training since I was five, and by that point I was already pretty strong with a sword. And I was hot tempered, sometimes, and he'd get frustrated and stupid, too, because he wanted to catch me up and surpass me in that arena, too. We'd fight a lot — he kept saying that he was older than me and one day he'd show me what it meant — that he was going to be the better soldier in the future, because I was so weak when it came to blood and shit. We didn't get along at all. In fact…"

He pursed his lips.

"Not till Maichu came, actually." He admitted. "Because he didn't make enemies with anyone — he just wanted to learn from everyone. Somehow it broke down the barriers between Kayu and I to a more friendly kind of rivalry. But… even so… sometimes I remember Kayu'd get a particular look in his eye. When his mind was made up… you couldn't change it. He… potentially, he was ruthless. And maybe… maybe in the end… Kikei drew on that."

"Or instilled it in him in the first place." Chichiri murmured sadly, bringing his fingers together absently as if saying a prayer for the lost soul. "In any case, it can't be helped now. All we can do is go to Kutou and put things to rights — for his sake as much as anything else. Kikei must be stopped, before more people are hurt."

He pushed open the door of the back chamber, and Maichu let out a gasp as he registered his Commander sitting on the bed, dressed in village attire and with his silver hair neatly braided back from his face. His distinctive blade lay on the bed beside him, as if in readiness for the trip, and despite appearing slightly tired and drawn, he seemed better than he had been the previous day.

"Hyoushin-sama!"

"Good morning, Maichu." Hyoushin's lips twitched into a slight smile, though Shishi saw the gravity in his amethyst eyes, and the question in his glance. Maichu hesitated, then he nodded his head.

"I'm all right." He said softly, in answer to the unspoken query. "I'm ready to go, for the Emperor's sake, to save Kutou."

"Then that's all of us except Hikari." Myoume leant up against the

back wall, folding her arms across her chest with a sigh. “She’s still upstairs. She said she needed a moment or two… just to put her thoughts in order.”

“This is a big deal thing for her to do, isn’t it?” Shishi said softly, and Myoume nodded.

“She’s terrified.” She agreed. “But she’s still coming. Still, it worries me that she might have doubts when it comes to the actual ceremony itself. If that happens… she might be in danger. Somehow we have to put her heart at rest about the path ahead.”

“We’ll protect her.” Aoiketsu said simply. “I have the *shinken*, and I’m not as handicapped as I was. That means for the first time I can fight as a proper soldier — and I was always better than the others in practice. I’m not afraid… I won’t let harm come to her. And Maichu’s here too — so even if the Commander can’t fight, we can. Besides, Myoume, you have your weird hallucinogenic magic, and Shishi…”

“I have Do-nee.” Shishi nodded. “So you’re right, Aoi. We’ll be fine.”

“Don’t forget what I told you, Aoiketsu.” Hyoushin said softly, and Aoiketsu reddened, nodding his head.

“I know.” he murmured. “I won’t lose focus, sir. I know who I am… I won’t let go of that.”

“Who else would you be?” Maichu shot him a puzzled look, and Aoiketsu spread his hands.

“Nothing important.” He said vaguely. “Don’t worry about it, Maichu — its all right.”

“If you say so.” Maichu looked mystified. “Because as far as I know you’re only Kaiga Aoiketsu — unless you’re goin’ to go with your looks and join a brothel as a courtesan after all…”

“Maichu, shut your face!” Aoiketsu exclaimed, and Shishi saw a flicker of a smile touch Maichu’s grave expression.

“Well, you never know.” He returned. “Stranger things have happened.”

“Like me going to save some whole country by dragging a great big dragon out of the heavens somehow?”

A voice came from the doorway, and as one the group turned to see Hikari, her expression troubled as she glanced at them each in turn. She was dressed in one of the gowns Aidou had stitched for her, her

dark hair pulled back from her face in it's usual tail, and she sighed, folding her hands together as she did so.

"So lets do this, then." She murmured. "If we're going — before I freak out completely, let's go."

"You seem unnaturally disturbed this afternoon, priest."

Miramu made himself more comfortable on the branch of the willow tree, stretching out along it as he cast a glance down at the round, stooped form of the elderly Hin below him. Startled, Kikei glanced up, almost dropping the vessel in his hands, and Miramu chuckled, kicking his legs absently as he rested his chin in his hands.

"Sorry — I didn't mean to startle you." He said, his tone unrepentant. "But you seemed agitated… and that's usually what brings you to find me. This time I thought I'd save you the trouble."

"You are as trustworthy as the snake whose poison you used to kill Hyoushin." Kikei snapped, his brows knitting as he shook his head. "Keeping from me the truth of that girl's identity… do I have you to blame, also, for the lack of contact from Kayu in the South?"

"Kayu?" Miramu's eyes widened with surprise, and he shook his head. "I don't know anything about your boy, Kikei. Why would I? He's gone to Kounan — and I'm here. More, this is where I'm staying — so whatever might have gone wrong with your plan, it's nothing to do with me."

Kikei eyed him for a moment. Then he sighed, shaking his head.

"Come down here." He ordered. "It hurts my neck, looking up, and from a distance people will think I've lost my wits, talking to a tree."

"The way you are at present, Priest, perhaps you have." Miramu said unsympathetically, although he obediently slipped down from the branches, leaning up against the sturdy trunk as he folded his arms across his chest. "Am I to guess that you've not heard anything, then, from your spy in Kounan?"

"Not a word since the night before they reached the bandits' stronghold." Kikei admitted. "More, I can't detect any trace of the charm I put on the mirror. As if…"

He faltered, and Miramu's lips twitched into an amused smile.

"As if a sorcerer maybe broke the spell?" He suggested innocently, and Kikei cast him a suspicious look.

“What do you know!?”

“Nothing.” Miramu held up his hands. “As I said, I’m here and he’s there, so there’s no way I could have done anything. And I’m not a sorcerer. Just an assassin. But I did tell you about the Suzaku Seishi known as Chichiri, and that his sorcery is strong. I expect that if you’ve not heard from your boy, it’s because they’ve sought him out and neutralised your magic.”

“You think Kayu has been captured?” Kikei demanded, and Miramu shrugged.

“Captured, killed, or both.” He said carelessly. “It’s a dangerous place, bandit country. I don’t know… Kayu’s an enemy soldier, after all. And Reizeitei-sama’s said to be a pretty alert Emperor. An Emperor who uses bandits to govern and control areas of territory is an Emperor who you probably don’t want to cross — I imagine Kayu might have learnt that first hand.”

He chuckled, a humourless glint in his dark eyes.

“Perhaps Kayu’s head adorns the front gate of the Kounan palace.” He added cruelly. “Anything is possible.”

“Miramu.” Kikei glared at him, shaking his head. “That’s enough. You say you know nothing, so do not speculate on things you can’t know for sure.”

“You asked, I answered.” Miramu said simply. “The truth is I don’t know where your boy is, Kikei. And I don’t care, either. My work for you has all been carried out to the letter, after all. I have no current orders, and I have no reason to leave this place. Unless you have another errand for me, of course.”

Kikei’s lips thinned, and he gazed at the assassin thoughtfully.

“You are sure that the girl is Seiryuu no Miko?” he asked quietly, and Miramu nodded.

“Absolutely.” He agreed. “What of it?”

“Then she must come here…?”

“Undoubtedly.” Miramu spread his hands. “I’m not Toroki, and I don’t make prophesies. But I expect… it won’t be long before she does. After all, the Shinzahou are here. You shouldn’t worry so much about stray ends, Kikei. Your prey will be within your grasp soon enough, don’t you think? After all, she needs the Shinzahou to raise the God. One is not enough. You have the other three. She will come.”

“Yes, I think you are right.” Kikei’s expression relaxed somewhat at this, and he nodded his head. “In which case…”

He frowned, glancing at the vessel in his hands.

“I’ve strengthened the spell that surrounds the treasures.” He said softly. “I’ve employed Suiko and Kitora to protect them with mage-magic, and the barrier that guards them should keep out everyone who tries to steal them. I won’t let this opportunity slip through my grasp.”

“Everyone?” Miramu tilted his head on one side. “Even the Seishi who seem to protect her?”

“Even so.” Kikei agreed. “The power of the mages is strong, after all. It’s meshed with the power of the Shinzahou. The only entity able to cross that threshold — other than me, of course, who controls those mages — is the Miko herself. That way I will sever her from those who seek to defend her. And the trap will be set.”

“You think they’ll let her wander off on her own?” Miramu snorted. “I doubt it. She’s a young girl, isn’t she? That’d be foolish, even by Seishi standards.”

“No, but the barrier will prevent anyone else from reaching the Shinzahou.” Kikei shook his head. “So even if they try, they will not be able to follow her. Only I will be able to guide that girl to the treasures she seeks. Only the mages themselves are able to pass freely in and out of the place where their treasures are sealed. Seiryuu no Miko — Sukunami Hikari — will be in my power the moment she steps into the vault and is engulfed by their magic.”

“You have been thinking, after all.” Miramu observed, and Kikei nodded.

“I’ve lived a long time, and I’ve done so by making sure all my bases are covered.” He said frankly. “Keep that in mind, Miramu — if there’s anything else you’ve kept from me, it’d be as well to tell me now.”

“Kept from you?” Miramu frowned. “Such as what, exactly?”

“I don’t know. If I did, I wouldn’t be asking you.” Kikei said impatiently, and Miramu laughed, shaking his head in amusement.

“You’re too paranoid.” He scolded. “You’ve already told me that you’ve made all the preparations necessary to snare your Miko — almost as if you suspect me of stealing the treasures myself somehow.”

“No, I don’t suspect you of seeking to aid the Miko.” Kikei shook his

head. “But you’re still an assassin — a man in whom I can’t fully trust. So it’s better you should be aware of the futility of it before you try. After all, the mage’s magic may well strike dead anyone who crosses through without the blood of the Miko. And I’d hate anything to befall you.”

“I take the warning.” Miramu bowed his head slightly. “And in return, there is one thing I can tell you.”

“One thing?” Kikei looked wary, and Miramu’s expression twisted into a cold smile.

“I think you should hurry to get your preparations in position.” He said quietly. “I heard a rumour that someone fitting Toroki’s description was sighted in Kutou’s territory. I think… soon… your Miko will come.”

“I see.” Kikei’s eyes narrowed. “Then I will waste no more time talking to you. The Emperor is engaged at present, and I’d rather complete this errand before he is released from his duties. He has been… unusually decisive of late, and I do not wish to excite his suspicions while he is still pondering on Hyoushin’s demise. I will be relying on you, Miramu, should these people choose to storm the palace. You are more effective a deterrant than any of that stupid Meihi’s foolish soldiers and I know your ruthless heart won’t allow any mistakes. Keep them at bay — kill any you need to, barring the one I seek. Understood? This is your final errand from me — and if you succeed, your reward will be incalculably great. Do you follow?”

Miramu eyed the Priest for a moment. Then he bowed low before him, his thick braid falling over his shoulder.

“It’s understood, Kikei-sama.” He said softly. “Leave it to me.”

“Good.” Kikei sounded approving. “Then keep your eyes and ears peeled, and report to me if there’s anything I need to know. Nothing will stop my plans now — before long, Seiryuu no Miko will truly fall into my hands!”

With that he hurried off across the grass, and Miramu pursed his lips, a thoughtful look entering his blue eyes as he focused his attention on the faint sensation flickering at the edges of his mind.

“Myoume really is here.” He murmured. “Somewhere… close. But she’s doing her best to shield her exact location from me. I suppose if I tried, I might root it out — but she’s the last person I intend on seeing. At least today… until I’m also prepared.”

He slipped his fingers into his pocket, pulling out a handful of

carefully sculpted arrow-heads, and glancing at them for a moment.

“I have a lot to do, it seems, in a short time.” He reflected. “Before that stupid sister of mine charges into battle and makes things complicated for the both of us. Seiryuu no Miko has no doubt arrived in Kutou, and before long everything will come to a head. I haven’t any time to lose.”

He clenched his fist around the cold hardness of the heads, feeling their sharpness prick against his skin.

“The final battle approaches.” He murmured. “And this time… I must not fail.”

“So this is the land that once belonged to the Kaiga family?”

As they stood at the edge of a barren stretch of land, Myoume frowned, turning to cast Hyoushin a quizzical glance. “It’s deserted, I grant you — there’s noone here. But the land is choked in death, and I can’t imagine you want to be here. Why did you choose this place? I don’t understand… of all places, I would have thought…”

“There’s no time for personal feeling in this.” Hyoushin cut across her, shaking his head. “We’re here, and in a place not too far from Kutou’s capital. This is adequate. And as you see — noone inhabits this land. It belongs to the crown, now — but noone has ever sought to repopulate the place where so many people were killed. It is well for us to be here. Noone will come looking for us in this cursed place.”

“Are you sure about that, sir?” Aoiketsu bit his lip. “I mean, this was the place…”

“Where I was a slave.” Hyoushin said briskly. “Yes. But that is neither here nor there.”

“I wish Chichiri could have stayed.” Hikari shivered, pulling her cloak more tightly around her. “There’s a horrible cold feeling in this place — it cuts right through you and I really… I don’t like it at all. I thought Kutou was supposed to have pretty places, but…”

“Kutou’s a war-scarred nation.” Maichu said sadly, and Aoiketsu nodded.

“Maichu’s right.” He agreed. “In places the landscape is still lush and fresh, because climatically speaking, Kutou has the best of all four of the countries. We have plenty of water, and the land is ideal for crops. Historically, Kutou has been powerful for that reason. But… in some ways, it’s made the people each other’s worst enemies. There’s

too much ambition — people want too much, and it all fell apart."

"This land has that taint to it." Myoume nodded. "I can't imagine what it was once like, but there are a lot of lost souls crying on the wind."

"Ghosts?" Shishi demanded sharply, and Myoume shook her head.

"Not even that." She replied. "Just pieces of lives that were once here. That's all."

"So it is." Hyoushin said gravely. "Yet this place, abandoned as it is, is no use to us to camp in. After all, it is very open. Unlike the south, rain may fall in Kutou at any time. And it would be unpleasant to be so unprotected in the case of a storm."

"I guess that's true." Aoiketsu turned back to glance across the landscape, taking in the charred, scorched remains of trees and timbers as he tried to imagine the day the Kaiga family had fallen. Somewhere, deep inside of his heart he almost thought he could visualise a fair-haired man on a black horse riding high above the dancing flames, raising his sword as he gave the order to strike the family down. He closed his eyes, forcing the image from his mind as he did so.

"It must have been terrible." He whispered. "My father… did all this. Didn't he? Those people…"

"The Kaiga family were allies of Shoukitei." Hyoushin said impassively. "Therefore they were enemies to the Shougun and consequently to the current Emperor, too."

"But innocent people died too." Myoume said softly. "You can't cut yourself from it completely, Hyoushin — surely? Of all people, you must know that."

Hyoushin frowned, and for a moment he didn't speak. Then he raised his gaze, and Aoiketsu almost let out an exclamation at the genuine emotion that glittered in the amethyst eyes.

"The last order Kaiga Gin gave as the army approached was to kill all the slaves." He said softly. "The innocents, as you call them — they were the ones killed by the Kaigas themselves, not by the Shougun's army. Nakago cleansed the estate of twisted, greedy men and women who sought power and did not care what ends they reached it by. Debauched, cruel people… you have no idea to what depths they were willing to descend."

His lips thinned, and Aoiketsu could tell that, despite the evenness

of his tone, the recollection was one that struck deep into the Meihi's heart.

"We were herded together, and arrows were fired." He murmured. "I was the only one who survived."

"That's awful!" Hikari's eyes widened with horror. "Hyoushin-san… that really happened here? They just… turned on you all? Just like that?"

"We were tools. Nothing more." Hyoushin managed a faint, humourless smile. "And we were no longer useful. Kaiga Gin feared we would turn on them and join the Shougun's army in fighting for our freedom. So he sought to remove the danger. I only survived because I was struck unconscious when I fell… and because, when I came to myself, Kintsusei-sama helped me. And that brings me to another reason for reaching this place. Aoiketsu, Maichu — you both remember, do you not, the errand by which the Emperor first sent us to these parts? We approached it from a different direction, true enough — but even so, you must recall the caves where Suiko's scale was sealed."

"The underground caves! The water lakes!" Aoiketsu's eyes lit up with remembrance. "*That's* where we're going?"

"It seems as good a place as any to regroup." Hyoushin agreed. "And it seems all the members of the party are well acquainted by now with sleeping in caves."

There was a flicker of irony in his tone, and Myoume sent him a quizzical look.

"How far are these caves, Hyoushin?" She asked softly. "Chichiri brought us here so you wouldn't have to ride, but if it's a long way to walk…"

"It is not beyond my capabilities." Hyoushin assured her. "The air is not so hot and humid here, and I have more energy, even considering my injury. You should not worry about me, Myoume. I am fine."

"Then what are we doing? We're going to the cave to work out our plans for what happens next?" Maichu asked, and Myoume nodded.

"That seems to be the best plan." She agreed slowly. "Especially since you and Hyoushin… really must not be seen by anyone right now."

"Myoume's right." Shishi said frankly. "Since you're exiled traitors, right?"

“Well, something like it.” Maichu agreed. “I guess that’s true.”

“Which way to the caves?” Hikari asked, and Aoiketsu glanced across the horizon, then gestured to the West.

“That way.” He responded. “They lie at the very edge of Kaiga territory — between Kaiga land and the Imperial stronghold surrounding the capital city. It’s a good place to use — no wonder the Commander decided to come here. Strategically it’s not hard to defend, and there are several passages if we needed to hide.”

“So was my thinking.” Hyoushin agreed. “Even if I am unable to use my blade, you two are not so hampered. And Shishi, you are skilled with a weapon also, so I am told?”

“Yes.” Shishi nodded her head. “I’m a bandit, after all. It goes with the territory.”

“You already look tired, though, Hyoushin.” Myoume bit her lip. “You could at least let me carry that sword. It’s heavy, and I don’t even know why you brought it.”

“A soldier never travels without his weapon.” Hyoushin shook his head. “Thank you, Myoume, but it is fine at my belt where it belongs. I am not as weak as you perceive me to be, after all.”

“Do you think he’s right?” As they made their way through the scorched land, Hikari dropped back, casting Aoiketsu an anxious glance as she slipped her arm into his. “I’m scared enough as it is, Aoi, but Hyoushin looks… don’t you think he’s already pushing himself?”

“Chichiri’s spell probably jarred his arm some.” Aoiketsu admitted. “But he won’t say so, because that’s how he is. He doesn’t ask for help from anyone, if he can avoid it — he’s not that kind of man.”

“But even so…” Hikari sighed. “I don’t know. I don’t like this place. It’s like Myoume said — it’s choked in death. I can feel it too — it’s horrible.”

“I guess that’s because you’re the Miko, huh?” Maichu eyed her keenly. “It’s sort of funny that this is the first time you’ve been to Kutou.”

“And if it’s like this everywhere, I won’t be coming back.” Hikari said acidly. “Miko or not, Kounan is a nice, peaceful place. This, on the other hand…”

“People here are suffering a lot.” Aoiketsu said sadly. “Things like the Commander said — he’s never talked about the Kaigas like that before, although I knew that the Emperor had been the one to save

him from death and slavery. But I guess… this isn't the first or the last example of that kind of behaviour. The people in Kutou aren't all bad people, or all good. But they're frightened as well."

"In the southern province, it's especially bad." Maichu added. "Rebels have operated there for a long time — and the families who want to be loyal to the Emperor find it hard because of the pressure from the others around them. It's a long way from the capital and many of the communication routes have been blocked at one time or other. Then Maru-nii and his companions got killed… and it got even worse. Kutou needs you more than it ever has, I think… you won't let us down, will you, Hikari?"

"Let you down?" Hikari bit her lip. "I hope not. I really hope not. I want to be strong and do as Hisei said — follow that guidance and save everything. But what Chichiri said about being a Priestess is still there in my mind. I needed to know it — I couldn't go into this blind. But even so… I wonder if I'm really as brave as everyone needs me to be."

She sighed, glancing at her hands.

"My world is totally different from this one." She admitted. "There's no comparison at all. And in that world, I'm just an ordinary middle school student who's not even doing that well in her classes, let alone anything else. I'm not especially clever, or popular, or any of those things. I've done dumb stuff, and got myself into silly situations. And sometimes I can't even stand up for myself, even if I know something is wrong. Yet for some reason, Seiryuu chose me. And it might be because I'm the Shinzahou, or because my parents are who they are. But, even so… what if he made the wrong choice? I'm not my parents any more than you are yours, Aoi. I'm Hikari. What if that's not enough?"

Aoiketsu sighed, reaching up to slip his fingers through hers as he squeezed her hand tightly.

"It's enough." He said softly. "You say you're hopeless, but we already know you're not. Just because in your world you feel like you've failed, it doesn't mean the same is true here. You said yourself this place is different, after all."

He gestured to the group ahead, where Myoume and Shishi were helping the injured Meihi as much as he would allow them to.

"Myoume believes in you." He added. "She sees a lot more than other people, and she has total faith in you. Shishi does, too, and she's pretty hard to please. Chichiri and Tasuki do — Meikyo and Eiju do.

And I do, too. So does the Commander, I think. That's why we're all here, doing this. Because we know you're strong enough. You just have to believe it yourself."

"Don't leave me out of that list, lover-boy." Maichu protested at that point. "I believe in the Miko too, okay? That's why I came to Kounan, ain't it? Stop using it as a chance to flirt with her, okay? There ain't time for that."

"Maichu." Aoiketsu reddened, but Hikari smiled, offering the soldier a rueful smile.

"It helps, though." She admitted. "Having everyone behind me. I couldn't have come here alone. Seiryuu did the right thing, sending me to Kounan. Now I know more about this world and what happens in it — if I'd been thrown into this place straight away, it would have been different. Kikei might even have been able to manipulate me — but there's no way I'm going to let that happen now."

"Then I guess you're fine." Maichu said simply. "Ain't you?"

"I suppose." Hikari admitted. "I guess… maybe it'll be better when I know exactly what our plan of action is. We've done a lot of dangerous stuff so far, so I shouldn't let myself be scared by this one."

"Those are the caves, ahead." Aoiketsu gestured. "We'll be able to rest there, and discuss that."

"The Commander's pretty cool under pressure, even when he's hurt." Maichu reflected. "Comin' to a place like this, with all those shit memories, jus' because that cave is a safe shelter."

"He came here before, though, with us." Aoiketsu reminded him. "I don't think he's ever let his past get in the way of his orders."

"Guess that's why he's been Commander so long as he has." Maichu shrugged. "Hey, Hikari — you manage okay over the steps? It's sorta broken on this side — I found that when we were here the last time, huntin' through the passages."

"I think so." Hikari nodded, hitching up her skirt somewhat as she skipped neatly over the crack. "Though thanks for the warning."

"And this is where Seiryuu's scale was." Aoiketsu led the way into the cavern. "Or actually, almost. It was underneath the lake, to be exact."

"It really was underneath it?" Shishi, who had been close enough to overhear, turned to send the soldier a doubtful glance. "The scale was… underwater?"

“Sort of.” Aoiketsu nodded. “The opening to the shrine is beneath that pool. I had to swim down — well, in the end, both Maichu and I did. But the chamber there was airtight. It was like it was protected by holy barriers.”

“To think that that was only the beginning of this quest.” Hyoushin murmured, and Aoiketsu glanced at him, seeing a faint flicker of something in his amethyst eyes as he settled himself down against the cave wall. “If I had forseen where it would end, perhaps I would have tried to counsel the Emperor to change his mind.”

“Even seeing the future isn’t always enough to be able to change it.” Myoume said bitterly, shaking her head. “Even so, though, we’re here — that’s progress in itself.”

She settled herself beside him, reaching across to touch his brow, and the Meihi flinched back, casting her an annoyed look.

“What now?” He demanded, and Myoume’s blue eyes narrowed.

“You said it wasn’t far to walk, and within your capabilities.” She said accusingly. “But you’re warm again, which means we’re not moving any further today. You are an idiot, you know — you need to stop trying to be strong all the time and accept that right now, you’re not.”

“She sounds like a naggin’ wife when she talks like that.” Maichu reflected, a flicker of amusement in his dark eyes. “You almost sound like Aidou-san, Myoume — you ought’a watch that.”

“I’m just concerned about not letting anyone else die before we get to the palace.” Myoume snapped, a faint flush of embarrassment touching her cheeks. “We can’t afford to lose anyone else, and even if this place is adequate shelter, pushing himself to get here so that his fever gets worse again…”

“The water in this place is said to have beneficial healing qualities.” Hyoushin said evenly. “And I believe it to be the truth.”

He glanced at his right arm, then shrugged.

“When I was first rescued by the Emperor, this is where he brought me.” He added. “My arm had a deep arrow wound, and he removed the barb and bathed the gash with water from here. It healed remarkably quickly after that, and did not become infected. I do not know what the mineral compound is — but that it has a positive effect on health I have no doubt.”

“This is a*healing* source?” Shishi’s eyes widened in surprise, and

Hyoushin nodded his head, reaching out his good arm to scoop something up from the ground.

“This is the proof.” he said evenly. “The arrow-head the Emperor removed from my arm eighteen years ago. The scar it left behind is minimal — you would probably not even perceive it. It may not have the magic Suzaku’s Mitsukake allegedly had, in terms of providing a complete cure. But I believe that the water will bolster my strength some — and possibly anyone else who feels their spirits somewhat lacking.”

Myoume pursed her lips.

“You’re a crafty one sometimes.” She reflected. “Why not say that before?”

“Was there a need to?” Hyoushin looked genuinely surprised. “I thought we sought cover — so I suggested it. That’s all.”

Myoume sighed, shaking her head slowly.

“You’re truly impossible.” She murmured. “Fine. You win. The water can be drunk, then? Or just used to bathe a wound?”

“Both.” Hyoushin responded. “Probably on account of the shrine having been here so long, the water here is pure.”

“It sure does look pure.” Shishi peered into the glittering depths. “More so even than the spring beneath the mountain in Sairou. I think Hyoushin-san is right, Myoume.”

“Then we’d do as well to fill our water gourds from here, and make camp.” Myoume reflected. “We’ve some food with us, thanks to Aidou-san’s forward thinking, and Chichiri sent me with some herbs for you, Hyoushin, if you should need them — so let me know if you do. For now we’ll put down our roots here and begin to work out what we’re going to do next. After all, this isn’t the kind of thing we can do twice… we have to get everything right the first time around.”

Chapter 22

Chapter Twenty One

It seemed so empty, somehow, within the palace.

Kintsusei drew his robe more tightly around his body, sinking down onto his bed as he contemplated the day's events. Despite the fact it had been another busy, chaotic day within the palace, his mind had not been on politics at all but instead on the fate of his Meihi ally, deep in the south of enemy territory. Since the day that Kikei had put the crown on his head, and before, Hyoushin had always been there at his side — the silent, reassuring shadow in whom he had had complete faith and trust.

"What were you doing in the south, my friend?" He murmured, biting his lip as he fought to keep a grip on his emotions. "Were you seeking the Miko? I won't believe you intended to betray me. I wish I'd had the chance to ask you that, at least… what you sought, when you took that gamble. I've sent you all over the place, gathering treasure and risking your life — yet in the end, did you die because you wanted to help me? Even considering everything that's happened… Hyoushin, I'm sure of it. I *know* that's why you went to Kounan. At the cost of your life, you went to find the girl."

He buried his head in his hand, for the briefest instant wishing that his fifteen year old soldier self could lose his temper and yell and punch the walls in the way he had occasionally done as a reckless, hot-headed child. But he knew that it was futile, now. As Emperor of Kutou, he had a duty to his people to maintain the calm facade, even when inside he felt like everything he had ever relied on was crumbling apart. He had not slept fully since Kikei had clarified the truth of Hyoushin's exile, and then, when the final blow had been struck, it had felt like someone had taken a sword and plunged it deep into the Emperor's stomach.

"Emperors do not have friends." He whispered, feeling the hot wetness of tears trickle down his cheeks as at last he let his grief get the better of him. "It is not permitted to have favourites and those who get close seek to exploit their position to their own ends. It is a fickle, fake environment full of deceit and ambition, and I despise it. I have always despised it. But I have never been alone with it before. I didn't realise how lonely it would be, if ever you didn't come back."

He got to his feet, pacing restlessly to the window as he rested his hands on the carved sill. Memories flickered through his thoughts and he closed his eyes, drawing on them as they became ever more vivid in his mind.

__Me__? "The young boy gazed up at the stooped priest, eyes wide with disbelief as slowly he shook his head." But… Kikei-sama, you can't… I mean… I'm not… I'm just Kintsusei. I'm only…"

He faltered, unsure of how to continue, and his bulky companion rested a gentle hand on his shoulder, slowly nodding his head.

"Kintsusei-sama, you are Shoukitei-heika's only surviving son." He said softly. "Although you have lived and trained as a soldier here for so many years, you can't be ignorant of your bloodline. That your mother was a lady of the Emperor's inner circle, and that your father…"

"Was the sly, treacherous bastard who cheated and killed his way through Kutou's landscape." Kintsusei said abruptly. "I have no connection to that man, now or ever. I'm the Shougun's man, Kikei-sama. I haven't any interest in being Emperor, and I told him so, too. I told him I'd follow him wherever he went. If anyone should be Emperor of Kutou, it should be him. He's the one who's begun to change this world, after all."

There was a silence, and Kintsusei felt for a moment that he'd said something that he shouldn't have done, as the two guards that had accompanied the Priest exchanged looks. At length Kikei sighed, folding his hands absently in the folds of his long sleeves as he shook his head.

"You haven't been told." He said softly. "Have you, my boy?"

"Told?" Kintsusei echoed, staring at his companion blankly. "Told what?"

"Nakago is dead." Kikei said quietly. "He will not be coming back to Kutou — now or ever."

"Dead?" Shock wracked through the young boy's form, horror glittering in his dark eyes. "But… that isn't… Shougun is… noone can… it can't be! He can't be dead… he's Nakago! He's Seiryuu's chosen… why… how… I don't understand. I don't understand!"

"He went to the Miko's world, Kintsusei-sama." One of the guards bowed his head respectfully, as again the silence threatened to become oppressive. "There, it's said, he fought the warrior Tamahome and did not survive the encounter."

"Tamahome?" Kintsusei repeated blankly, and Kikei nodded, bringing

his fingers together in a gesture of prayer.

"Fighting for Kutou, the Shougun was cut down by Suzaku's people." He said gently. "And Kutou… Kutou has noone else to whom they can turn. They need an Emperor, if they are to recover and rebuild — to take hold of things and pull them together under one sky once more. If not… anarchy will reign over all of the East and people will suffer far more than they have already done. I have done what I can — helped orphans of the war here and there as I've been able. But the cost… will be incalculably higher if central government cannot begin to function. Without Nakago's influence, there is noone to keep the army in check. The Emperor is dead, as is all of his family, and most of his court. You, my boy… you are the only one of his blood descendants not slain by the Shougun's wrath. He respected your loyalty to his cause enough to spare you — I think he would approve of us anointing you King."

"But…" Kintsusei was floored, and he shook his head, swallowing hard.

"But I'm only fifteen." He whispered. "I don't know anything about being a King or any of that shit."

He flushed, realising suddenly how coarse his language sounded in front of the finely dressed, officious man of Seiryuu.

"I… I mean… any of those… things." He amended awkwardly. "I… I've been a soldier since Mother… since I was seven. I've never been allowed at court — Father didn't want me there, and shunned both Mother and I most of the time. I can't be Emperor like that, can I? I don't know… I don't know how."

"That is why I'm here." Kikei offered him a gentle, sympathetic smile, and Kintsusei felt a faint sense of comfort at the man's kindness. "And those of us loyal to you. You are the only heir — there is noone to contest your throne. Kutou will soon bow to you, when they realise that you want peace. And change, too. Don't you want that? To finish your Shougun's work and cleanse Kutou of corruption?"

Kintsusei bit his lip, his gaze darting across the chamber to where the room's only other occupant had been sitting on his own makeshift bunk, listening to the whole exchange in measured silence. There was no expression on his face, but even in the few months they had known one another, Kintsusei was able to guess what his Meihi companion was thinking and he knew that Hyoushin was concentrating intently on every word spoken, straining to decipher their meaning and understand what was going on. He frowned, turning back to the priest.

"I can't." He said firmly. "I promised the Shougun I'd train Hyoushin to be a proper soldier, and I don't want to break my word. Especially if… if

Shougun isn't coming back. I have to…"

"You'd put that slave over the future of the whole country?" The second guard demanded, and anger flared through Kintsusei's young body as he sprang to his feet, slapping his hand hard across the man's face.

*"Hyoushin **isn't** a slave!" He exclaimed. "If Shougun had heard you speak like that, he'd have vaporised you where you stood! Hyoushin is my comrade and my ally — and I made him a promise!"*

"Kintsusei-sama." Kikei held up his hands, gently guiding the indignant young soldier away from his startled victim. "Please. Remember what it is we're here for. His words may be coarse and careless, but the man is right. For Kutou's sake… we need you. All of us. Not just one man, but everyone in Kutou."

"But I said… I promised…" Kintsusei faltered, meeting Hyoushin's gaze again as he did so. The Meihi's amethyst eyes did not display either emotion or opinion, but even so, Kintsusei knew that there was little protecting his companion from the teasing or bullying of the other soldiers. With his broken language and odd appearance, he mused bitterly, it was only a matter of time before someone returned Hyoushin's existence to little better than what it had been before. Even though Nakago had accepted the pale-skinned man into his ranks, behind closed doors not all of his fellow soldiers had done the same, and whilst most were indifferent to his presence, some had already begun to treat him with disdain. Kintsusei was well aware that, without his own interference and continued presence, there was a very real chance of his protégé coming to harm. And despite the differences in their background, the young soldier was determined not to let that happen. They were from totally different worlds, yet in the harsh nature of their mutual loneliness they had forged a bond which Kintsusei knew would not be easily broken.

He had saved the Meihi from slavery, true enough — but in his quiet, unquestioning way, Hyoushin had begun to be something that Kintsusei had never truly had before — a friend who was willing to give everything, and ask for nothing in return. Hyoushin's simple concept of loyalty and dedication had made a distinct impression on the young soldier's heart, and as this crossed his mind, Kintsusei decided that he would not repay that trust with betrayal.

He frowned, taking a deep breath to calm himself, forcing himself to rationalise what Kikei had told him. The Shougun who had led them so determinedly towards Kutou's new dawn would never again stand before them, giving orders that seemed strong and reassuring in their certainty. His powerful aura was no longer hovering over Kutou, ready to bring down the East's enemies in a blaze of blue flame. For an instant, panic and confusion

ruled the young boy's senses, as he registered the depth of loss this man's death had caused.

"Since I became a soldier, Nakago-sama has been the only one who has given my life a purpose." He murmured. "How can he be dead?"

"It is a harsh fact for us all to accept." Kikei said gravely. "I am sorry to be the one to bring you this news, Kintsusei-sama."

Kintsusei closed his eyes briefly. Then, as he drew his thoughts together, he felt a surge of determination rush through him, intoxicating his senses and giving him a new, fixed sense of purpose. Somewhere in the daze and confusion he suddenly saw a way through, and his eyes snapped open, a glitter of resolve in his dark gaze.

He shook his head, holding up his hands as he made up his mind what was to be done.

"If you want me to be King, Kikei-sama, then it's on one condition." He said softly, realising as he did so that he spoke not as a boy under Nakago's command but as a man who was about to take his first steps alone. From here on in, he knew, the decisions and choices would rest with him.

*"And that being the case, I **will** be heard." He told himself inwardly. "If this is what they want, it will also be on my terms, too. Nakago-sama taught me that. To never compromise when you can win — **I will win**. If I am the only one they can turn to, I will be the Emperor I choose to be. If they truly want me… they can accept me on my own conditions."*

Kikei's eyes widened with hope, and he nodded, offering the boy a smile.

"As Emperor, you can make all the conditions you want, Heika." He said evenly. "What is it, then? What is your request?"

Kintsusei did not answer right away. Then he spread his hands.

"Emperors have those in whom they trust. Advisors, and protectors, and things like that. Don't they?" He said evenly. Kikei nodded again.

"All those will be assigned you… your life will be in no danger, so long as I have anything to do with it." He agreed. "If that is your concern, my boy, I will see to it…"

"Then I want Hyoushin." Kintsusei interrupted. "As my protector."

At this, even the Meihi's impassive gaze flickered with surprise, and Kikei's words died on his lips as he stared at the young soldier in mystified silence.

"I made him a promise." Kintsusei took advantage of the silence,

resolution in his gaze as he glanced at the Priest and his armed companions. "And I won't break it. Shougun was trying to change Kutou, and that's what I want, too. People like Hyoushin aren't slaves — they should never have been slaves. I don't want that any more. My Father and his allies did horrible things to people like the Meihi and the Hin and I want to stop it. And I'll start with Hyoushin. I'm not going to abandon him."

"But… Heika… as your protector…" Kikei protested feebly. "A man whose training has been a bare few months… a man… who… forgive me, but whose presence may excite an already unsettled court…"

"Let it." Kintsusei's gaze became obstinate. "I don't know those people. I don't trust them. My experience of Court is a place full of people who bullied and tormented my mother till she killed herself — backstabbing people whose hearts I can't read and whose loyalty is never guaranteed. If I'm going to go anywhere near that world — if I'm going to be dragged into the pretence of it — I intend to take Hyoushin with me. Because I can trust him, Kikei-sama. Even if I can't trust anyone else."

"Trust…" Kikei hesitated, turning to glance at the young Meihi doubtfully, and Kintsusei bit his lip.

"Hyoushin… will you come, if I ask you to?" He asked softly. "If I… let them make me Emperor… will you come?"

Hyoushin's eyes flickered with something that bordered on gratitude for a moment. Then, very carefully, he got down on the floor in an imitation of Kikei's own original gesture, raising his head to meet his confused friend's dark gaze.

"If is Emperor's will, I come." He said softly, and somehow Kintsusei felt better, hearing such simple words from his enigmatic tribal companion. He smiled, reaching down to pull Hyoushin to his feet.

"I'll keep my word, you know, so long as you keep yours." He said frankly. "I'll train you and make sure you're all right. And you… will you use those skills you learn to protect me? I don't trust anyone else to do it."

"Meihi keep promises." Hyoushin said gravely. "I am sworn ally of Kintsusei. I will never harm him. To break promise is shame. I will not."

*"And what if he **does** turn on you, Heika? Betrays you out of vengeance for his people?" The second guard asked hesitantly, sending Hyoushin a wary, distrustful look which the pale man returned with a blank one of his own.*

"He won't betray me." Kintsusei shook his head. "Will you, Hyoushin?"

Hyoushin frowned.

"I do not understand this word." He admitted. "Be… tray. I do not know… what is this?"

"To turn against someone who trusts you." Kikei said quietly, and Kintsusei saw a flicker of cold rage surface in Hyoushin's eyes. He shook his head emphatically.

"Meihi not do this." He said firmly, indignation in his tone. "Never. Is death first. Not this."

Kikei sighed.

"Heika, I wish you'd think about this a little more carefully." He said reluctantly, and Kintsusei shook his head.

"This is my decision." He said bluntly. "If you want me to be Emperor, then that's the only way I will be. If Hyoushin comes too."

Kikei eyed him for a moment, and Kintsusei met his gaze steadfastly, knowing as he did so that he had won. At length the priest held up his hands, bowing his head in defeat towards his young sovereign.

"As my Emperor wills it." He murmured quietly. "I will make the necessary arrangements."

Kintsusei smiled, suddenly feeling giddy at the sense of triumph and achievement that welled up inside of him. He nodded.

"Do so." He agreed. "I'll keep my word, Kikei-sama, and so will Hyoushin. And I'll rely on you to keep yours, too. If you really want me to be your Emperor — I'll need your help to be the best one I can be."

It seemed such a long time ago.

Kintsusei opened his eyes, resting his head against the cool glass as he fought once more with his emotions. Eighteen years had passed, during which time he had never once had reason to doubt his steady, inobtrusive companion. Though he had never openly expressed his emotions, Kintsusei knew that Hyoushin had worked quietly and diligently in his name, keeping the promise he had made the day they had first met. And yet, in the end, they had been parted by politics — in a way that no matter how hard he tried, Kintsusei found impossible to understand.

"I have become a weak king, and relied on you too much." He whispered. "The friend on whom I have depended, the one man in whom I always had trust. I have asked too much of you, Hyoushin — and I have paid the price. You're beyond my reach, and I… I must

make this decision alone. I have always asked your advice… and yet… this time… what would you have me do? I must not go to war with Kounan to avenge your death — you would not forgive me, if I did something like that. And yet… why do I feel like everything is slipping out of my hands?"

"Do you really think I'll be all right, if I do as Kikei-sama says?"

His own boyish words echoed in his senses, teasing at his thoughts once more, and he frowned as he remembered the Meihi's soft, simple reply.

"Is Kintsusei-sama." Hyoushin had said quietly. *"Kintsusei-sama is different. Is kind. Has helped me… will help others. If King is this way, Kutou will heal. I will help. Kintsusei-sama will be good King. For Kutou… for all people. I believe this."*

"And yet in the end, even though I didn't intend to, I seem to have betrayed your faith somehow." Kintsusei sank back down on his bed, burying his head in his hands. "All I can do is cling on to Kikei's information and hope that somehow Seiryuu no Miko comes into Kutou's range soon enough to salvage something from this. I don't want to be Emperor of the East alone, but if that's my punishment for being such a weak King, so be it. Somehow, I will face it. And I will find a way to avenge you, my friend. No matter what. Even if Kutou gains peace, I will not — not until the one who killed you is also dead. You would not approve, but even despite that, I can't do anything else. So this I swear, Tou Hyoushin whose true name I never knew. On my crown and my blood-stained heritage as a King of Kutou — I will see your killers dead before me. I *will* have justice in this… no matter what!"

"It's really getting late out there now."

Hikari peered out of the entrance to the underground cave, a pensive expression on her young face as she took in the darkened landscape. In the dim glow of the silver moonlight, somehow the war-ravaged land seemed even more sinister and unwelcoming than it had before, and she stifled a shiver, turning to rejoin her companions.

"It's so spooky." She murmured. "I wouldn't be surprised if there were ghosts, the way it looks right now."

"Even if there were, it's not ghosts we have to worry about." Myoume pointed out softly. "Unless they're celestial spirits, ghosts can't wield weapons. And it's swords and arrows we have to keep an eye open for. Tomorrow is going to be a big day for all of us… it's

better you spend less time thinking about people who are already dead and more time about those who are still alive, Hikari-chan."

"We're very close to the capital and the palace here." Aoiketsu reflected, as he spread out the battered map he had brought with him on the ground. With the flicker of firelight all around them, it was quite clear to make out the tracks and pathways, and Hikari peered over his shoulder, watching him trace his finger along the most direct one.

"That's the main thoroughfare." He added. "I suppose it depends on whether we trick our way in the front or sneak our way in the back. Either will be guarded though — so neither one will be easy."

He sighed, pushing the map back.

"No matter how much we plan it, it's not going to answer any of our questions." He said sadly. "We don't know what's been going on in that palace for the past week or more. That's our main problem strategising. We're here — fine, we are. But as Myoume said earlier — we only have one chance to do this. It's got to be the right choice."

"Well, Hisei said that we needed to find the Shinzahou and somehow neutralise the mage spirits." Hikari hugged her knees tightly to her chest as she thought things over. "I don't know how we should do that, but maybe wherever the treasures are is where we should be aiming."

"The shrine of Seiryuu, in which case." Hyoushin murmured pensively, and Hikari glanced up in surprise, shooting the injured Meihi a startled look.

"Hyoushin-san? You know where they are?"

"Unless they have moved them in the interim, I imagine so." Hyoushin agreed. "At least, the shrine was where Kikei had them the last time I was here. At that time I was permitted unrestricted access to that place — even armed, if in the presence of my Emperor. But in light of that knowledge, Kikei may have felt it better to relocate them. Even so, I can't imagine he would have taken them far. The shrine is, after all, the core of Seiryuu's holy presence in Kutou. And Kikei may not be a true-hearted Priest, but to fool the Emperor he would have to at least appear devout."

"The shrine will be heavily guarded, then, won't it?" Aoiketsu frowned. "And ordinary soldiers don't go inside of there often unless summoned by someone more important. I've been inside a few times because of that — when I woke Suiko's spirit, for example — but

otherwise…"

He trailed off, shrugging his shoulders helplessly.

"Do you think they know we're coming?" Shishi asked at that point, hopping down from the rock she had been perched on to sharpen her blade as she slipped it back into its sheath. "Kikei and the Emperor, I mean. Can they tell?"

"Kikei's magic may or may not be strong enough." Myoume spread her hands. "I can't detect his taint from here, so I doubt his spiritual presence is equal to Chichiri's or any other like-minded sorcerer. However… it isn't just Kikei we have to concern ourselves with. I can sense Miramu… and no doubt he can also sense me."

"Miramu." Aoiketsu's expression darkened. "And you think he might come here? Or at least, tell Kikei where we are?"

"I have no idea what he might do." Myoume admitted. "He's the unknown element in all of this. I don't know what he knows or how he intends on using that information."

She sighed heavily, smoothing out her skirt as she glanced down at her hands.

"The only thing I know is that he's here." She murmured. "And I feel it — probably as strongly as he does. Tomorrow we will face one another. Tomorrow we will be opponents. And tomorrow, one of us will die."

"Myoume…" Hikari bit her lip, reaching out to grasp her friend around the wrists. "You don't know that. I told you — I came here to change things and I won't let anything happen to you."

"I know." Myoume offered her a faint smile. "But I've always been aware of this confrontation, since I was a girl of ten years old. I've never known with such certainty before that tomorrow is the day — but I know it is, now. And how it must be. Only one of us will live through this fight, Hikari-chan. And I can't kill my brother. No matter what he's done… I can't kill him. I just don't have it in me."

"He deserves it." Shishi said shortly, and Myoume shrugged her shoulders.

"Maybe." She said helplessly. "But I still remember the other Miramu — the one I grew up with and the one I still love. So I can't."

"So you're going to let that jerk kill you?" Maichu demanded, and Hikari started, turning to stare at him.

“I thought you were asleep!” She exclaimed, and Maichu shook his head.

“Some hope, with you lot yappin’ on.” He said frankly. “Besides, there’s a buzz in the air. Sleepin’ ain’t on anyone’s agenda tonight — that’s for sure.”

“No kidding.” Aoiketsu said ruefully. “But listen, Myoume. Maichu and Hikari are right — you don’t have to let Miramu hurt you at all. If we can keep the two of you separated till sundown tomorrow, well, then the prediction will be broken. Won’t it?”

“I don’t think it’s as simple as that.” Myoume shook her head. “I’m not a killer by nature, Aoi, but I’ve seen death’s shadow stalk my family for ten years waiting for this opportunity to strike. It’s growing darker by the minute… I don’t think, no matter what you do… you can prevent us from meeting.”

“Then slit his throat.” Shishi said pragmatically. “Or even better, let me do it. Then you won’t be to blame, an’ you’ll be safe. Won’t you?”

“This is turning into an unpleasant discussion.” Hyoushin said mildly, and Shishi cast him a quizzical look.

“I would’ve thought *you’d* have wanted to cut his head off, considering what he did to you.” She said bluntly, and Hyoushin offered her a faint smile.

“I see you have the same approach as Maichu does when it comes to truth over tact.” He observed softly. “Is that, perhaps, a trait of the mountain folk? Or something peculiar to you yourself, Shishi-san?”

“I’m not being rude.” Shishi reddened, despite herself. “I’m just saying it how it is. He poisoned you and you nearly died. Don’t you want to get your own back on him, too?”

“I could.” Hyoushin said evenly. “But if I did, then someone would have the right to wreak vengeance on me, also… would they not? The killing may never end. Myoume cares for her brother. Therefore Miramu must have some saving virtue to justify that faith. And I do not believe in unprovoked killing, Shishi. So no. I have no desire to get my own back.”

“That’s messed up.” Shishi objected. “You talked about the Kaiga family being killed like it was nothing, out there. But Miramu… dammit, Miramu’s killed lots of people. He’s hurt Myoume by doing all the things he has — he’s hurt my family, by killing my brother and assaulting my cousin. He’s hurt you by poisoning you with his arrow… don’t you think that someone should stop him doing what

he's doing?"

"Yes." Hyoushin agreed. "He should be stopped. But stopping someone and taking vengeance on them is not the same."

He sighed, stretching his good arm as he held his fingers up to the light.

"If I sought to avenge every scar on this hand, I would never have had any form of freedom." He added. "I was a slave for seven years, so I understand how precious that freedom is. But to shackle yourself to the deed of hunting down and slaying those who hurt you… you taint your own soul, you know, with every life you take. This is why as a soldier I have only ever fought on my Emperor's orders. I have only ever taken lives to defend those I believe in. And I have never sought revenge for any deed done to me. If I did, it would have consumed me long ago. It was Nakago, after all, who slew the Kaiga-ke. I was just a survivor in the aftermath. Nothing more."

His lips twitched into a rueful smile.

"I believe, at Kutou's court, there is much gossip about the Meihi ghost whose first ever swing of a sword parted a man's head from his body." He murmured softly. "I won't deny that it's true. And the man was one I knew — one Kaiga Gin relied on to keep the slaves in line through any method possible. I had many, many reasons to hate him — many things I might have wanted to avenge. But in the end I think I slew him for one reason and one reason alone — that in that instance he threatened Kintsusei-sama… and Kintsusei-sama had proven himself my ally. To my mind, that is the only reason we fight. To uphold justice and defend our allies. Not to settle private grievances. At least, as a Meihi, that is my only understanding of it. My tribe, after all, choose not to. In order for me to do so… the reason had to be just."

"I've never heard you talk like this before, sir." Aoiketsu murmured, and Hyoushin nodded his head.

"Many things are going through my mind at present." He admitted. "But I have decided to relay those thoughts only because I don't want more innocent people to die unnecessarily. We have come to Kutou to avenge many things. But the way in which we seek to do that is to raise Seiryuu from his sleep and have him act on our behalf. Isn't it?"

"What if Miramu had killed your Emperor?" Shishi demanded. "What would you do then?"

A flicker of something surfaced in Hyoushin's amethyst eyes, then

he offered a rueful smile.

“I believe I may have told Miramu that if he dared harm Kintsusei-sama, I would be his vengeance.” He admitted slowly. “Perhaps my words are hypocrisy after all.”

“Well then.” Shishi looked satisfied. “So killing Miramu isn’t such a bad thing, whatever the reason for doing it. If it’s to avenge Jin or to help Kutou — what does it matter, in the end? He’s a jerk. He’s got karma owing him. It’s not wrong to want to deliver it.”

“But Myoume is Miramu’s sister, is she not?” Hyoushin pointed out. “In part I now owe her my life. To repay that by slaying one she loves — even one who is touched by darkness — would hardly seem to be a fair return. Would it?”

“I bet you wouldn’t be so calm about it, though, if it *was* your Emperor’s blood he’d spilled.” Shishi said flatly, and Hyoushin shook his head.

“Doubtless not.” He admitted regretfully. “Threats against the man who freed me make me angry, and I am a different sort of soldier when my temper is aroused. I suspect you are right, Shishi. That for all my words… if it came to it, I would still choose to act the same way.”

“I suppose that’s honest.” Myoume glanced at him, and Hikari noticed the faintly apologetic look in Hyoushin’s eyes.

“For your sake I can forgive his assault on me.” He admitted. “Because of the debt I now owe you, such things are considered equal in my mind. But if he were to harm my benefactor — I would find it hard not to strike. Even knowing it would hurt you to do so.”

“Well, Miramu rather incites that feeling in people. You’re not alone.” Myoume sighed. But this really isn’t a nice topic at all. Let’s not get carried away by hot tempers and petty grievances before the fact, all right?”

“Petty, you say, when you’re talking about being killed by your own brother!” Shishi protested, and Myoume smiled.

“It’s all right.” She said quietly. “I’m prepared for it. It’s something I accepted when I undertook Byakko’s tasks for me in the first place. A Seishi is born to sacrifice themselves for the Beast God’s calling, after all. Byakko chose me, and I’m not afraid. If my death goes some way towards our success, I won’t run from it. Don’t look like that, Shishi. You either, Hikari. This is how it is. It can’t be changed. So lets not dwell on it any further.”

“Maybe it could be changed.” Hikari said obstinately. “If I wished for it to change, maybe then it could.”

“I forbid that.” Myoume said sharply, and Hikari’s eyes widened in surprise.

“But…”

“Your wishes are for Kutou and this world. Not for me.” Myoume held up her hands, shaking her head. “I’ve manipulated and schemed and schooled enough destinies to understand that. If you don’t use Seiryuu’s power for what it was meant for, then you’ll be as bad as Hongou Yui and you’ll let everything go to dust. Do you understand, Hikari? The wishes of the Miko aren’t something to be taken lightly.”

“I guess… I know that.” Hikari bit her lip. “But… I don’t take your life lightly. Or Jin’s. Or anyone else’s. Besides… I’ve been thinking hard about the wishes and what Hisei said. And I think… I only need two wishes. To save Kutou — I only need two.”

“How so?” Aoiketsu looked curious, and Hikari shot him a wan smile.

“One, to raise the beast Gods from their sleep.” She said simply. “And two, to command them to protect and defend their lands from harm. If I can make it so they defend united not divided, then surely that will be enough. Right?”

“I suppose so.” Aoiketsu shrugged. “Which leaves you one wish left.”

“And I could still wish for Myoume.” Hikari added. Myoume shook her head.

“By the time you raise Seiryuu, it may already be over for me.” She said frankly. “No, Hikari. I forbid it. You must not waste that wish on me. Besides, surely there are other things that are important to you, too? Or hadn’t you realised that, no matter what happens tomorrow, your acquaintance with this world is coming to an end. You and Aoi will part, Hikari-chan, just as you will leave Kounan and Shishi and Chichiri’s family far behind. Isn’t that something you’d rather fix your attention on, as opposed to me?”

“Aoi…” Hikari faltered, and Aoiketsu reddened, slowly shaking his head.

“Gods don’t make people fall in love.” He said firmly, brushing his hand absently against the *shinken* as if somehow asking it to confirm his assertions. “Even if Seiryuu connected you and me, Hikari, that’s

not why we ended up the way we did. I told you in Hokkan that it's enough just to be together now, after all."

"But if you could wish for it…" Shishi frowned. "Didn't Suzaku no Miko do that? Didn't she wish to be with Tamahome, and Suzaku granted it?"

"So I've been told." Myoume nodded her head. "So there is a precedent."

"Why is it okay for me to use my wish for that and not to save you?" Hikari asked suspiciously. "It doesn't seem like Aoi and I are anything to do with Kutou's future beyond this adventure either."

"Well, I'd like a happy ending for someone." Myoume admitted sheepishly. "And you two — I pushed you together, so… I suppose… I'd like it to work out. Somehow."

Hikari glanced down at the ground, turning this over in her head for a moment. Then she raised her gaze to Aoiketsu's, reading the expression in his seiran eyes. Slowly she shook her head.

"Mother took Father back to my world because it was Father's wish." She said softly. "And… Aoi wouldn't be happy in my world. I know that. He wouldn't. And I'm… I'm the Miko, aren't I? Mum and Yui-san can't come back here now their duty is over… so even if I wanted to stay — even if I wished to — I guess I couldn't do it. So that's no good. Besides… besides, Aoi's right. I… I love him. I love him a lot — more than I've ever loved anyone before and I know I'm going to cry like hell when we have to say goodbye. But I… I don't want to have him because Seiryuu made it happen. It isn't about that. Even if it worked for Mum and Dad. It's not the same — we're not the same. And I… I don't want us to be together because of a wish. That's all."

"Hikari." Shishi murmured, and Hikari smiled, dashing away the sprinkling of tears that glittered on her lashes.

"I'm not wishing for that, because Aoi and I don't want it." She said decidedly. "Not that way. Even if people from my world can change this one, I don't want to take advantage of that. It… it would be selfish. And I… I'm trying not to think of myself any more. At least, not when so much is at stake. Everyone here has made sacrifices, after all. I guess, in the end, mine will be saying… saying goodbye."

"Brave words." Hyoushin murmured, and Hikari shrugged.

"That's how it is." She said evenly. "When I think about what you said, Hyoushin-san — about the Kaigas and what they did here — my

problems seem pretty pathetic anyway. So it's all right."

"Aoi — are you goin' to let her jus' disappear, then, when this is all done with?" Maichu demanded, and Aoiketsu offered him a sad smile.

"Hikari's right." He said simply. "Love isn't about being forcibly tied together by magic. It doesn't work that way. I don't know why Seiryuu bound us together or whether he intends on it ending when Hikari summons him to Kutou. The way I feel… it seems stronger than that, and I… I guess I'm willing to hold onto that hope that somehow it is. Somehow… I don't know how. But even if it means saying goodbye — it's better to love someone you chose to love, not feel obliged to love. I don't want it to be like that, with Hikari. I don't want Seiryuu's magic involved either. Not in something like this."

"Then I guess there's still one wish left." Shishi reflected. "If Myoume won't allow it, and neither will Aoi — what will you do with it, Hiki?"

"Don't know, yet." Hikari pinkened. "I may not even get to that point, anyway. But so long as I do — so long as I make the first two wishes, the third one isn't so important. Not if I can do everything I have to with those two."

"When Kutou is safe, you can think again." Myoume offered her a smile.

"You won't change your mind?"

"No." Myoume shook her head. "And I want you to promise me on your honour as Suzaku's Shinzahou that you won't try to do it against my will, either. I'm not as good a person as you think I am — and I've made things happen to fit Toroki's predictions and Byakko's will. If I die tomorrow, I'll just be completing that cycle and facing my own destiny. I don't want you to intervene. Do you understand?"

Hikari chewed down hard on her lip, then she sighed.

"I guess." She said unwillingly. "If you feel like that, I can't go against you. Although I think it sucks, Myoume. Shishi and me, we *know* you're a good person, whatever you think about it. Even if you have guided people — including us — it's all been for a good reason. And I really don't want to lose another friend. Jin was bad enough."

"Then why don't you wish for that?" Myoume suggested, and Hikari looked startled.

"For what?"

"Jin."

“Would *any* God bring someone back from the dead?” Aoiketsu looked doubtful, and Myoume shrugged.

“I’ve no idea, but if Hikari was willing to try it on me, she could equally try it for Jin.” She replied. “Then you’d only be dealing with one friend’s absence, Hikari-chan — and Jin has far more future purpose in this world than I do. Once this ends, so does my reason for being here. Toroki’s curse, the lot of it. I exist to stop the destruction in Kutou. No other reason. Jin, on the other hand… he was different.”

“Jin.” Hikari murmured, seeing the flicker of hope spark in Shishi’s eyes as she spoke the word. Slowly she nodded.

“I guess I could try.” She agreed. “I mean, I want… I want him back too. I miss him… a whole lot. And… for Shishi and everyone…”

She sighed.

“I just don’t want anyone to be dead at all.” She said plaintively. “Do you think I could just wish for that? For dead people to not be dead any more?”

“Some people are better off remaining dead.” Hyoushin said quietly. “For their own peace of mind as much as anyone else’s. I think it is unwise, to wish to bring anyone back. One passed is passed. I won’t pretend I don’t have people I would like to see again — but even so, there are some lines you shouldn’t cross.”

“Well, there’s no point in worrying about the last wish just at the moment, is there?” Maichu pointed out. “We’ve gotta get into the friggin’ palace first — right?”

“Right.” Aoiketsu looked thoughtful, and a flicker of unease stirred in Hikari’s heart as she interpreted the resolution in his blue eyes. “And I’ve got an idea regarding that.”

“An idea?” Myoume looked quizzical, and Aoiketsu nodded.

“You all aren’t really welcome in these parts, and the Commander and Maichu are probably known outlaws now.” He said evenly, getting to his feet as he brushed the dust of the cave floor from his clothing. “But there’s just the chance that I’m not included on that blacklist — yet. Miramu did see me, and he may have reported it to Kikei — but he’s a slippery shadow of a character and he may have kept it to himself. For some reason known only to him, he doesn’t seem to want me dead. With that in mind… I might be the only one who can infiltrate Kutou’s court without being harmed.”

“Infiltrate…” Hikari trailed off.

“It would be dangerous.” Hyoushin warned. “An unknown situation exists inside those walls.”

“I know.” Aoiketsu agreed. “And with so much going on, I wouldn’t try and stay there long. But if I was to go, now… I might be able to find out at least where the Shinzahou are, what kind of guards are on duty and how difficult it would be to get past them. Even if it is dangerous — and even if I am suspected of treason too. I’m the only one who might manage it… so I’m going to go take a look around.”

“You could be killed!” Hikari exclaimed.

“Perhaps.” Aoiketsu said frankly. “But you’re the only one who has to be in place tomorrow, not me. You’re more important than I am right now — you’re the only one who can save Kutou. So better I risk it than all of us — don’t you think?”

“Be careful.” Hyoushin said quietly, and Hikari turned to stare at the Meihi, dismay in her gaze.

“You’re *letting* him go?”

“More, I’m commanding him to.” Hyoushin said simply. “Aoiketsu is correct. This is his duty and he must fulfil it.”

“Are you sure?” Myoume frowned, and Hyoushin nodded.

“I know better than any here what Aoiketsu is capable of if faced with a conflict situation.” He said evenly. “He will not be killed so easily, Hikari. Don’t look so afraid. You should have faith in your knight. I have faith in him… after all, I trained him.”

Aoiketsu’s lips twitched into a smile, and he nodded his head.

“I won’t let you down.” He promised. “I’ll be back as soon as I can — hopefully with some answers.”

With that he was gone, and Hikari bit down hard on her lip, a mixture of anger and frustration swirling up inside of her.

“What if he’s hurt?” She demanded. Hyoushin frowned.

“I told you. Have faith in his skill.” He reproached her gently. “Besides, I made a promise a long time ago to his mother, before she died. I told her that I would do all in my power to teach and sculpt Aoiketsu into a man that Kutou could depend on. I will not break my word. That he sees these things must be done, and does them is just a culmination of all he has been taught. I will not stand in his way. He is no longer a child and he does not need my protection — his decisions in Kounan have proven that beyond all doubt.”

“But doesn’t it worry you?”

“Yes.” Hyoushin admitted. “I won’t pretend otherwise. Aoiketsu is dear to me, and if something should befall him, I would probably not forgive myself. But even so, Hikari — I *must* let him act. Do you understand that if I try to hold him back, he is useless to you in all respects? One day, I believe, he will be more even than he is now. He is a fine soldier, but he has the potential to be a skilled official and to work as much for peace as in war. He will come back safely… of that I am sure.”

“I guess…” Hikari faltered, rubbing her temples. “At least, I hope you’re right. Please, Aoi-kun — come back soon!”

Chapter 23

Chapter Twenty Two

The palace was in silence.

As Aoiketsu slipped along the darkened hallways, his fingers hovered over the hilt of his blade ready for the briefest sign of trouble, but there was nothing. The guards that usually stood at their posts were nowhere to be seen, and to the young soldier the atmosphere seemed eerie and unsettling.

Slipping through the familiar darkened landscape had sent a strange mixture of nostalgia and consternation through his mind as he had realised that the last time he had been here, there had been nothing more on his mind than following orders and finding Shinzahou.

“But so much seems to have changed.” He reflected, as he crossed the forecourt and made his way into the cluster of halls and buildings that made up the outer shell of the royal enclave. “Inside me? Inside Kutou? I wish I knew. I didn’t question anything, then. Now I’m questioning everything. Is it Nakago’s spirit lurking inside of me, or something else? Hikari, maybe? I wish I understood completely.”

He paused, leaning up against the wall as he remembered the odd sensation entering the Kaiga land had brought.

“Almost like I was there. Like for an instant, I saw it through my father’s eyes.” He realised. “I wonder how much of him is inside of me, anyway. He’s dead, right? But even the dead have power over the living. I should know that. Hyoushin-sama said it himself, didn’t he? That he’d promised Okaasama that he’d teach me to grow for Kutou’s sake. Maybe that’s why I was so drawn to her grave so often when I was here before. Because she decided what kind of person I was going to be… after all.”

He frowned, rubbing his temples as a strange sensation washed through him.

“I wonder what you’d think now, Hahaue.” He whispered. “About your son who’s sneaking around Kutou’s palace in the guise of a traitor to the East.”

He took a deep breath, listening for any sounds as he prepared to

cross the threshold into the next secure section of the palace. He had come almost by instinct back to his childhood home, but under the cover of blackness and with Suzaku's holy sword at his side, he felt like a stranger thrust for the first time deep into the heart of an enemy's territory.

"I grew up here." He murmured under his breath as he peered carefully around the next corner, seeing that it was as empty as the ones before. "But right now it feels like I've never been to this place before. This is too peculiar. But given this — I'm glad I came on ahead. At least… where I'm concerned… it is true that there might not be an official report regarding me. Kayu's death means that he hasn't reported back to Kikei, so it all depends on Miramu and what he has and hasn't said. But Miramu's always been obtuse where I'm concerned, so who knows what he's let slip."

He frowned, pressing his hands against one of the big sturdy outer doors as it creaked open beneath his touch.

"Unlocked?" He muttered to himself. "That can't be an accident… surely? In a paranoid centre such as this one… At this rate, are they just going to let me walk right into the central chambers unchallenged? Into the place, even, where the Shinzahou are? If I could find that, maybe Hikari could be spared coming to this place at all. But even so… this is far too easy. As if I'm expected. As if… it's a trap."

"A wise observation."

The voice echoed softly from the shadows and Aoiketsu swung around, suppressing the exclamation that sprang to his lips as his grip tightened around the hilt of Hotohori's blessed sword. As he turned, he caught sight of the speaker, and his eyes narrowed in anger.

"Miramu." He whispered, and the assassin bowed his head towards the young soldier in acknowledgement.

"You've come a long way, Aoiketsu." He said evenly. "Isn't it funny? Even though we've been countries apart, I still reasoned out your movements enough to track you here tonight. Aren't you impressed?"

"Impressed?" Aoiketsu echoed. "By your stalking? I don't think so. I'm not here to play games with you, Miramu."

"No, I imagine not." Miramu said evenly. "The question is… *why* are you here? To rescue your Emperor from some undisclosed threat? Or is it to commit treason on this land? You've been evading Kutou's

contact so long that the Emperor begins to think you've been killed… perhaps you're a ghost, come to wreak vengeance."

"Maybe I am." Aoiketsu's eyes hardened. "It's said that Nakago was seen around the palace after his death — perhaps I'm the same. What do you think? Maybe that *is* why I'm here."

Miramu eyed him for a moment. Then he laughed, shaking his head.

"You're no ghost." He said softly, reaching out to brush his finger against Aoiketsu's cheek, and the boy flinched back, drawing his weapon as he wielded it between them.

"Touch me again and I'll run you through." He said blackly. "I don't care if you are a Celestial Warrior or if you've a quiver full of poisoned arrows. You attacked my Commander and that's something I can't forgive."

"Attacked… but not killed?" Miramu reflected, and Aoiketsu faltered, noting the odd expression that suddenly glittered in the assassin's blue eyes. "I see. That's interesting. So he's survived, has he? Who would have thought that his boast was right — that not even my poison could stop him from protecting his Emperor's life."

"What have you done to Kintsusei-sama, you bastard murderer?"

"Me? Nothing. Not yet." Miramu shook his head. "I've only cleared the halls of guards. I haven't even told Kikei that you were in the South, or that you're as wrapped up in this as anyone else… you should be grateful to me for that, Aoi-kun. It might yet save your life."

"I don't need favours from you." Aoiketsu snapped, feeling the same sense of bitter anger and frustration churning up inside of him as he met the assassin's even gaze. He raised the *shinken*, poising himself to launch an attack as he glared back at his foe. "Tell them what you like… if you can get there before I kill you and Kikei too."

"*Kill*… me?" Miramu's eyes widened slightly, then a faint, humourless smile touched his lips.

"Well, so the son *is* like the father too." He whispered. "This is the you that's been hidden away, isn't it? The one that all the training and mollycoddling has tried to either suppress or groom — I don't know which. But the you that's been flickering in your heart since the moment we met. Does it feel good to want to kill me, Aoi-kun? Does it rush up inside of you and make your blood boil with excitement? I wonder. Nakago was famed for his mass slaughters, after all — and you're young enough yet to surpass him in that — don't you think? A

brutal, brilliant Shougun in his own right — like your father and your grandfather, will you follow the same bloody path in Kutou's name, then?"

Aoiketsu froze, staring at him in dismay as the assassin's soft-spoken words cut through him to the quick. He faltered, and Miramu laughed, shaking his head.

"Maybe not yet." He mused. "I see. Perhaps that's my fault, in the end, for not managing to remove your Commander's influence from you after all. I knew that people were coming… I can feel my sister's chi from here. I knew you would be the one to come here, so I decided I should be the one to welcome you. After all, as I've said before — you and I, we are reflections in the same mirror in so many ways, aren't we?"

"We are *nothing* alike, Miramu." Aoiketsu said coldly. "Nothing at all."

"Really? I wonder." Miramu said lightly, leaning casually back against the wall as he cocked his head on one side. "You aren't the gentle, naive, idealistic soldier who I first saw in Kutou, are you? Your eyes glitter with hate and a desire to kill — you're suppressing it, but it lives inside you. Just as it grew inside of me. Now you understand, don't you? What curses fathers can wish on their children. You are a more dangerous weapon than that sword you hold, and I think you know it as well as I do."

Aoiketsu frowned, remembering the hot flush of rage that had rushed through him on Kayu's death.

"I *won't* be like you." He said quietly. "Whatever you say. You're a disgusting example of human life, Miramu, Seishi or not. And I'm never going to be like that. *Never*. You might be the bastard your father was. You might be worse. I'm not like that. I'm not Nakago. And I never will be."

"Well, time will tell." Miramu murmured. "Even so, you have surprised me. Hyoushin… truly lives, then? Even despite the fact he was pierced with a poison for which there is no known antidote?"

"You're not as smart as you think you are." Aoiketsu snapped. "The Meihi had a remedy for snake poison. And the Commander is strong."

"So he is." Miramu paused, digesting this. Then he nodded. "Well, so much to the good, I suppose."

"The… good?" Despite himself Aoiketsu lowered his sword, eying his foe warily. "What does that mean?"

Miramu did not answer straight away. Then his eyes narrowed, and Aoiketsu saw a glitter of resolve flare in the man's indigo eyes.

"It is past midnight, now… you were later than I anticipated, and I have been waiting for some hours — everyone else is asleep." He said quietly. "It means, too, that this is the day that my sister and I will meet. I've done all I could to avoid that, Aoi, but today is it, nonetheless. I feel her coming closer and I know that there isn't much time to do any of the things that need to be done."

"What are you talking about now?" Aoiketsu demanded. "Myoume has no intention of killing you, and you don't seem to want to kill her. What makes you think it'll happen?"

"Because if you know my sister, Aoi-kun, you'll know she's rarely ever wrong." Miramu said quietly, and Aoiketsu saw a flicker of regret in the man's dark eyes.

"So what are you going to do?" Aoiketsu's grip on his sword tightened. "If I did kill you here, then that would break the prediction anyway. Wouldn't it?"

"But you won't. Because you need my help." Miramu said frankly. Aoiketsu's eyes widened in disbelief.

"*Your* help?" He repeated incredulously. "Why would I ever need your help?"

"Kikei is planning to use the power of the four Shinzahou to raise the beast Gods and gain domination over not only Kutou but all four worlds." Miramu said softly. "To do this, he both needs and seeks to destroy the girl — Hikari. The last Shinzahou."

Aoiketsu's eyes narrowed, and at his glare, Miramu nodded.

"Yes. I know who she is." He said levelly. "The one with the power… Suzaku's treasure but also Seiryuu no Miko. I've had little to do of late but piece together the vague snippets of information I have alongside the random things Myoume would say to me when we were children. And I heard you disclose the information to your Commander in the forests of Kounan, before I shot my bolt and brought him down. This is the only reason that Myoume would align herself with Kounan so blatantly. Sukunami Hikari is Seiryuu no Miko. Kikei seeks to destroy her before she can bring Seiryuu and defend Kutou — but he also needs her because she is the Shinzahou. It's an interesting dilemma."

"And you think I didn't know that?"

“He doesn’t seek to utilise the Gods’ power so much as destroy them completely.” Miramu added evenly, as if Aoiketsu had not spoken. “He wants to absorb it for himself, and eliminate the Celestial Warriors in the process — the things that defend the treasures and protect this world from destruction. That is his objective… to eradicate any other source of power in this world than his own. For that end he seeks to manipulate and sacrifice Seiryuu no Miko — to take her power as the Shinzahou until there is no more life left in her, and then allow her to be consumed by Seiryuu before he takes the power for himself. This is Kikei’s final, dark aim. And he must be stopped.”

“So that’s it, huh? You’re afraid for your life?” Aoiketsu demanded, and Miramu snorted.

“You know better than that.” He said, shaking his head. “I don’t seek life. I don’t fear death. No. It’s not that.”

“Are you going to try and convince me that you care what happens to this world, then? Or to Hikari? Or even Byakko?”

“No. Not at all.” Miramu shook his head. “If the entire place falls down around me, so be it. I don’t care about any of that.”

“So why…” Aoiketsu faltered, his eyes opening wide with sudden comprehension as he interpreted the meaning behind the assassin’s words.

“Myoume.” He whispered. “You want to protect… Myoume.”

Miramu gazed at him for a moment, and Aoiketsu knew that he’d guessed right. He swore softly under his breath, shaking his head.

“You’re so messed up.” He murmured. “You kill and attack and you hurt people… but… you’ll betray the man who you’ve worked for so ruthlessly because your sister’s life is at risk? A woman who you said you hated and pitied — the one who predicted your death?”

Miramu pursed his lips, and Aoiketsu saw the faint glitter of tears in his blue eyes.

“There is only *one* thing in this world that I still care about at all.” He said quietly. “I won’t let Kikei hurt Myoume. She’s not like me. She’s not a coward or a failure, driven to darkness by the things that plague her. She was always stronger. Yes, I pity her. Sometimes I hate her. But most of all — I love her. And I… I want to protect her. If it’s the last thing I can do, Aoi… I won’t let today be the day that Myoume dies.”

His words were sincere and solemn, devoid of all of his usual taunting, and as Aoiketsu eyed his companion, he realised that this was not one of the assassin's games.

"You mean that." He murmured. "You really do."

Miramu nodded his head.

"I was told to come and prevent intrusions." He said quietly. 'But I've really done little but incapacitate the royal guard. Don't worry… I haven't killed them.' As Aoiketsu opened his mouth to protest. "For now I have only enough poison to carry out my specific tasks. I didn't come here to hurt you, or tease and taunt you — I came to find out what kind of Kaiga Aoiketsu you were, and what your resolve was."

"To… try and make me an ally?" Aoiketsu stared, and Miramu shrugged.

"That's a strong word." He replied frankly. "I don't have such high hopes as that. I just needed to know what your intent was. And whether or not I could count on it. It's gone too far for me to do this alone, now."

"Are you trying to tell me you *always* planned to betray Kikei?" Aoiketsu demanded, and Miramu's lips twitched into an ironic smile. He shook his head.

"I am a hired assassin and I work for coin." He said softly. "It's always stupid to get involved in politics, and I knew that. Yet I did it anyway — it became irreversable. As soon as I went to Sairou, I knew my involvement was too deep to just turn away. That was the first time, you know, in ten years that I'd seen my sister face to face. And then I knew that time was running out… so if it's the last thing I can do, I will protect her. It's all I *can* do, now, after all."

"You really are one messed up bastard."

"Well, I've never denied that." Miramu spread his hands. "And that's why I waited for you. Because I knew you'd be the only one who'd probably hear me out — even hating me as much as you do, I knew you were smart enough to pull the threads together into a complete web."

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

"I know that asking you to trust me at all is a tall order." He continued. "But I must ask it anyway. I have cleared the path for you and your friends to enter. It might be a trap — you'll have to decide that for yourself. But Hikari is Seiryuu no Miko. And today she must

raise Seiryuu. The only question is on whose will she'll be acting. If Kikei is allowed to mass the power of the treasures he already has — to overpower Hikari or to force her into a corner by threatening those she loves — then everything will be lost. She must not be brought into the power of the Priest — not even into his company. She must raise Seiryuu but she must do so without his intervention. Otherwise Kutou's future will be doomed to disaster."

Aoiketsu's heart clenched at the implications in his words, and Miramu nodded.

"Yes. You understand." He observed. "That Kikei may be able to use the girl you're so fond of to manipulate Seiryuu — that tainted, bastard God magic that might yet destroy everything you have. Well, Aoiketsu? To protect her — to protect your country — will you put faith in the word of a rogue and a murderer? In the man who tried to kill your Commander?"

"I won't forgive you for that, or for murdering Hikari's friend Jin."

"I'm not asking for that. I'm asking only for your cooperation." Miramu said quietly. "I told you. Today is the day I will face my sister. I will not hurt her. So there is only one possible outcome. And I… I will let it happen. I will let her kill me, even ask her to — I will not fight against her. But I *will* protect her. So before she comes, I must know that you will trust me. At least to do this."

Aoiketsu eyed him thoughtfully.

"You're going to *kill* Kikei, aren't you?" He murmured. Miramu nodded.

"I am." He agreed. "But in order to do so undetected, I have to be… out of the way. If you tell the Emperor and his companions that you've killed me, then they won't wonder at my absence. That you slew me in your push to enter the palace. I can conceal my chi from Kikei — I've been doing so since I began to work for him. You know my true nature, but they do not. And, dammit, there is no other choice for it now."

He sighed, his fingers going resignedly up to the collar around his throat.

"I am Amefuri after all." He murmured. "Today I will acknowledge as much. Today I will *be* Amefuri… and I will use his power to bring down the priest."

"How can I be sure you won't try and slay the Emperor or any of us?" Aoiketsu asked. Miramu smiled sadly.

“You can’t be.” He admitted. “My word doesn’t mean much, I know that. But even so, I’m going to ask you to try and believe me. Because although we’re protecting different things, our aim is the same. We both have people we want to keep alive. Don’t we?”

Aoiketsu stared at him, absorbing the genuine emotion in the assassin’s indigo eyes. For the first time since they had met Miramu seemed more like a man than a shadow, and slowly he nodded his head.

“I believe you.” He said quietly. “You mean what you say. You do want to protect Myoume. And you do intend to kill Kikei.”

“I always thought you were a smart boy, Aoi-kun.” Relief flickered in Miramu’s gaze. “Good. Then there is one more thing I must tell you. In order for your Hikari to raise Seiryuu, she must reach the Shinzahou which are housed deep beneath the Shrine of Seiryuu in a vault that Kikei himself fashioned long ago, to hide from civil riots. The seal cannot be broken by anything but the spiritual magic of a mage’s level — even as a Seishi I cannot open it. If anyone else tries to enter, they will be killed — Kikei does not intend any of the Miko’s companions to be able to interfere with his plans, and he doesn’t care how many are eliminated.”

“You think I’ll let Hikari walk around the palace alone, where anything might befall her?” Aoiketsu demanded, and Miramu shook his head impatiently.

“Even you are not so much of a fool as that.” He snapped. “No, that’s not my implication. Listen. I’ve been thinking on this since Kikei saw fit to tell me about the seal. You have, I believe, the spirit of Doryoku among your companions — don’t you?”

“Doryoku?” Aoiketsu stared. “You even know about that?”

“I am a shadow, Aoi. I learn.” Miramu said simply. “But it is true, isn’t it? That one of your party is possessed by her spirit?”

“I… suppose so.” Aoiketsu said slowly. “But you just said that anyone who… and surely I…”

“If you try and enter, you will be killed.” Miramu said bluntly. “And I can’t guarantee that anyone other than the Miko would be able to stay safe, either. But if that mountain cub really does have Doryoku inside of her, she alone might be able to cross into the shrine vault with Hikari and help protect her. It will be guarded — Suiko and Kitora will be there — and it will not be easy to get past their magic. But even so, it is the only way. *You* must not try and accompany her.”

“But to protect her… I…”

“To protect her best, *you* must distract Kikei and occupy your Emperor.” Miramu said softly. “Kintsusei-heika is not convinced of your treachery, or of the Meihi’s, either. I’m sure that, given that fact, you will be able to engage his attention. And that of the Priest, too. It will be just as dangerous that way, but it is the only way to keep Kikei busy while your girl invades his private space. I will no doubt encounter Myoume — she will want to come to your aid, but she and I have our own business to settle. But you are not alone — your young and stupid friend is with you, no doubt. And your Commander — you gave me the impression that he has also come to Kutou?”

“Yes.” Aoiketsu nodded. “He’s loyal to the Emperor.”

“He must be badly hurt, even if he lives. Yet he makes such a journey?”

“Hyoushin-sama is strong.” Aoiketsu said stiffly. “And so are Maichu and I. Don’t underestimate what we’re capable of doing in Kutou’s name, Miramu.”

Miramu’s eyes narrowed, then he smiled.

“So Kayu’s lack of return and lack of contact *is* thanks to you people after all.” He murmured. “Who would have thought that Seiryuu’s sheep would turn on one of their own simply for acting on the whim of a traitorous priest?”

“Kayu chose his side.” Aoiketsu said softly. “We chose ours. In the end, that was all.”

“Your friend’s blood is on your hands, Aoi?” Miramu asked evenly, and Aoiketsu shook his head.

“It wasn’t me who killed him.” He replied frankly. “You should not call Maichu a fool, Miramu. As I said, for our Emperor — there’s not much we wouldn’t be willing to sacrifice.”

“Well, so much to the good.” Miramu said quietly. “I can’t guarantee your lives in all of this… you should know that. I won’t attack you. But I can’t vouch for Kikei. I will kill him — but I won’t pretend I intend to protect you from his wrath.”

“We’re soldiers.” Aoiketsu said briefly. “We’ll do what it takes for Kutou.”

He sheathed his sword.

“I will do as you say.” He added. “We’ll play the decoy for you and

for Hikari, and I'll tell Kikei that you've been killed. But keep your word, Miramu. You might not care about this world, but Myoume does. Desperately. And I'm not just protecting Hikari. I want Myoume to stop suffering, too… not only about you and the things you do, but also from the horrible images she's been forced to see. I want her to finally have a world which is peaceful and a life of her own. Don't you want that, too?"

"Yes, I do." Miramu inclined his head. He fumbled in his belt, producing his unique knife and glancing at it. Then he held it out.

"Here." He said, and Aoiketsu gazed at him in surprise. "Take it as proof of our pact. And as proof of my death, when you face Kikei."

"Proof of…" Aoiketsu fingered the hilt gingerly, and Miramu laughed.

"There's no poison on it." He promised. "This was the blade that slew Hikari's young bandit friend Jin. He had courage and fight enough for a thousand bandits. There's an old tale in Sairou that says the spirits of men killed linger on the blades that cut them down. If any part of that boy remains within my blade, then maybe it'll give you all courage and fortune, too."

He sighed, and Aoiketsu was struck by the genuine regret in the man's eyes.

"I won't pretend I have a conscience." He added. "Not these days. I've become too twisted to really know right from wrong. But… that boy sticks out in my mind. He had courage, and he went to his death as a Seishi, even though he was just a bandit. Strong spirits aren't always born of Gods' powers, Aoiketsu. Sometimes they're born in ordinary men — men like Jin. Or men like you and your Commander."

Aoiketsu took the blade, glancing at it, then slipping it into the sash of his belt.

"I'm *not* an ordinary man." He said softly. "You told me that yourself, and I understand why now better than anyone."

Miramu eyed him for a moment. Then, much to Aoiketsu's surprise, he smiled, a flicker of relief in his dark eyes.

"So there *is* a path beyond the darkness, after all." He murmured, more than half to himself. "Even just to know it's there… I'm glad."

"What are you talking about now?" Aoiketsu looked blank, and Miramu shook his head.

“Nothing that need concern you.” He said briefly. “I’m simply observing, that’s all — the kind of man circumstances have made you. We are alike, perhaps, in some ways. But I supppose in the end, you’re right. We’re not the same. And I am glad of that.”

“I don’t see why you’d care.”

“Nor do I.” Miramu admitted. “But even so…”

He paused, shrugging his shoulders.

“I couldn’t find that pathway.” He said frankly, his honesty startling the young soldier as for the first time he realised how much pain his foe had lived with for the past ten years. In an instant, Aoiketsu realised that Myoume’s assessment of her brother had been more accurate than any of them had realised — that within Miramu’s twisted soul still beat a human heart.

“Even so, I hoped that it existed.” The assassin continued now. “And you’ve found it, so now I know it does. That’s why I held off on killing you — I wanted to see if you could face the blackness that lurked inside of you and still manage to keep your sanity. If you’d failed, I would have struck you down — I would not have consigned you to a life like mine, after all. But I… I don’t think you have failed. You might think it odd, Aoi-kun — but your progress and your fate has interested me since I first realised the parallels between your life and my own. There *is* a way to keep going forwards after all. To at least know that, before I die… I’m glad.”

“You sound crazier with everything you say.” Aoiketsu said softly, and Miramu laughed.

“Truly.” He agreed. “But that’s all right. Sanity, insanity — there isn’t any difference between them where my life is concerned. Perhaps in the end your strength will be the difference between success and failure.”

“We won’t fail.” Aoiketsu said resolutely. “You needn’t worry about that — or about me. I’m not weak, and I’m not a coward. I’m the Shougun’s son, and I will use that — even if I have no plans to take after him in terms of slaughtering innocent people. I just have Seiryuu’s blood in me, that’s all. I won’t be so easy to kill.”

He shook his head.

“I won’t run away from this fight, Miramu. Blood or not, danger or not, I will protect Hikari.” He added. “I will allow her to raise Seiryuu and save Kutou. And I *will* see the next day dawn with a new era over the East.”

“You’ll have to greet it for the both of us, for I won’t see it myself.” Miramu said evenly.

“Maybe you’re wrong.”

“No… I’m not wrong.” Miramu shook his head. “One way or another, today is my last day. It’s better that way. With all the things I’ve done, Aoi — Myoume will know that it’s a mercy she grants me, not a punishment. I will only have to face the judges for my other crimes — my life is forfeit and has been for a long time. Besides, I’m tired… I’m tired of this existence.”

He pursed his lips, resting his hand once more on the young soldier’s shoulder.

“In the final analysis, it seems that I’m *not* as strong as you, or as the Meihi Hyoushin.” He said soberly. “I never was born to be a hero. If I had been… then I wouldn’t have turned into this at the first sight of trouble. This is my lot and I will take the karma meted out to me. It’s all right, Aoi. It’ll be over one way or another for me after this battle.”

Aoiketsu bit his lip.

“Then we don’t have much time to play with.” He said quietly. “I’ll return to the others and put faith in your ruse to fool Kikei. For Myoume’s sake, don’t let me down. If you do, you won’t see the end of this world, either. Because I’ll kill you myself before it happens.”

“So be it.” Miramu inclined his head in agreement. “Till the final confrontation, then.”

And with that he faded out of view, leaving Aoiketsu alone once more in the darkened hallway.

He sighed, leaning up against the stone wall as he considered the surreal nature of their conversation.

“But I *do* believe him.” He murmured. “It *does* make sense. Even when we were in Sairou, he didn’t want to hurt Myoume. He’s always acted on that agenda — to protect her, to avoid her — to try and make sure he doesn’t cause her death. And now he knows Kikei’s true plan… now he’s changing sides. Not because he cares about Byakko or this world, but because he cares about Myoume. And he’ll do anything it takes to protect her.”

A faint smile twitched at the edges of his lips.

“He’s human after all.” He realised. “Well, I won’t waste his gambit. I’ll do as he says, and hope he doesn’t have another change of heart.

We don't have much time at all — and I *won't* let that fat old priest hurt Hikari!"

He had been away a long time.

Hyoushin shifted his position carefully against the cool stone, staring up at the uneven, clefting cave ceiling that arched over him as he debated whether or not letting his protegee run so deep into enemy territory had been a miscalculation on his part after all. One by one his travel companions had been claimed by sleep, even the anxious, apprehensive Hikari having given in to her exhaustion, and being careful not to disturb any of them, he got gingerly to his feet, putting out his right hand to steady his heavy body as pain jolted through his wounded limb.

"This is inconvenient." He muttered, glaring at his left hand in the darkness. "To be so encumbered… I dislike this sensation of weakness. To be constantly reliant on others… this is a position I have not let myself be in since I was ten years old. I have always fought my corner… and to be unable to do that, even, when so much is at stake…"

"Hyoushin?"

A soft voice from the black startled him, and he turned, meeting the quizzical indigo gaze of the prophet as he did so. He frowned, eying her warily.

"I thought you slept." He murmured. "Or were you simply pretending, Myoume? And secretly keeping watch?"

"I'm aware of everyone's sleeping and waking auras." Myoume said softly. "I was asleep, but I am easily woken in such a situation. I would never let my guard down completely, you know — and when you began to move, I felt it and it woke me. Your arm is hurting you, isn't it? And yet you seek to wander out into the darkness… to follow Aoi?"

"I was not going to do anything of the sort." Hyoushin shook his head, though inwardly he wondered if he was telling the truth. "You should not pay such attention to my activities, Myoume. I am not a china doll about to break at the least thing. I have survived this long, and my will is fixed on what we must do. I will not relinquish my grip on this life just yet. Besides, I have faith in Aoiketsu to return unscathed. He was my best student, after all."

"He is a long time." Myoume admitted, drawing her knees up to her

chest. “Sit down, Hyoushin. Even if you just intended to step out for air, it’s dangerous. We can’t risk anyone seeing us before the sun rises. We can’t give them advance warning of our movements, after all.”

“I suppose so.” Hyoushin said reluctantly, obediently dropping back down into a sitting position. “Very well. I will bow to your judgement.”

He eyed her carefully, taking in her troubled, clouded expression, and her words from the previous day ran through his thoughts.

“You are thinking of your brother, aren’t you?” He murmured. “This is the true reason you are awake at this hour — because you have Miramu on your mind.”

“Is it so obvious as that?” Myoume started, staring at him disconcertedly. “I didn’t think…”

“You are a prophet and a Seishi, but you are still a person beneath that, are you not?” Hyoushin said softly. “Geiyo Myoume is a human being, with thoughts and feelings of her own — is she not?”

“Sometimes I wonder about that.” Myoume admitted. “Considering how much I put Byakko’s will first, maybe I have become just a puppet to his whims. I don’t know. It’s hard to say.”

“But even though you spoke so strongly earlier, you fear the day’s arrival.” Hyoushin observed. “Don’t you?”

“Fear it?” Myoume sent him a confused glance. “What do you mean?”

“Noone seeks death, except those who have lost all hope.” Hyoushin said carefully. “I have seen the difference — between those who give up, and those who do not. Life is a precious, valuable commodity and there is nothing in existance which is worth more to any individual, be he Meihi, or Hin, or from any of the four corners of this world. We are all the same in this regard. Only those who have truly lost hope seek to die. And you… I don’t think you have lost hope. Have you? Somewhere inside of you, even though you say you accept your fate… you are afraid. Aren’t you? To give your life for your God and your country.”

“I am not going to run away from it.” Myoume said stiffly. “I understand what I have to do.”

“I didn’t say that.” Hyoushin shook his head. “Like a soldier goes into battle prepared to die for his King and country, so you have prepared yourself in body and in mind to face this fate. I don’t doubt

your courage or your resolve, Myoume — please do not misunderstand. Your thoughts have brushed through mine, after all — I know what kind of strength lurks within your will. But even so, it doesn't mean that you don't fear it. That deep down, despite your conviction, you are afraid of what the day will bring."

Myoume stared at him, speechless for a moment. Then she sighed, rubbing her temples as she shrugged her shoulders helplessly.

"I guess that's true." She whispered. "Because he's the brother I love so much, Hyoushin, I don't… know how to face him. And to die — I'm willing to die, for Hikari and the others to succeed. If that's my fate, I will go to it willingly. But yes. I… I am afraid of it, too. To die. To enter the unknown like that. As a Seishi, I must be willing to sacrifice everything for the greater good of this world. For Byakko's sake, I've taken up that burden. But… I suppose… Geiyo Myoume *is* a person, too. And she… is afraid to die."

"Perhaps it will not end how you expect."

"How else can it be?" Myoume said wearily. "I've seen so many things, Hyoushin… things that have come true. Horrible things, and yet, I haven't been able to stop them. Sometimes… sometimes I've let them happen. How can I even begin to think that this is preventable? Even more, how can I think that I deserve to survive, when I've stood back and allowed others to be killed? Kayu, for example? I told you I wouldn't interfere, and that my magic was useless in that case."

She shrugged.

"True, probably it was. But I didn't even try. I knew what would happen, but I let it. I let Hikari and Aoi be attacked in Choukou, so that Aoiketsu would reveal himself as the fighter he is — but my gamble might have seen them both killed. True, I tried to protect Jin in Sairou, but even then I failed to act quickly enough, or to keep him from my brother's attentions. I allowed Aoi to fight and kill a man in a circus near the Hokkan border, even though I could have settled the matter without bloodshed — because I needed to push the boy forward. I am a scheming, manipulative creature at the best of times. Why should I, then, evade the fate set out for me? I deserve to follow the same path that those people did. My twisting of their destinies is irreversable, after all."

She buried her head in her hands.

"Even Miramu's current will is probably my fault." She added hopelessly. "For telling him so long ago that we would one day face each other and fight."

“You are willing to blame yourself for a good deal.” Hyoushin said thoughtfully. “Some might consider that arrogance, you know.”

“Arrogance?” Myoume’s head shot up, and she stared at him in disbelief. “What are you talking about?”

“Not everything in this world depends on you or your actions.” Hyoushin said softly. “You are not fighting this battle alone.”

Myoume gazed at him for a moment. Then she smiled ruefully.

“You could take that advice yourself.” She reminded him. “You have a serious injury, and suffered a life-threatening attack. You aren’t well enough to be moving around, let alone preparing to confront your Emperor about events in Kutou. Yet here you are, as if the whole weight of the world was on your shoulders. How is that different from my way of seeing things?”

“We are both, perhaps, slaves to the cause.” Hyoushin acknowledged. He sat back, pursing his lips thoughtfully as he considered.

“Better than anyone, you have seen what lives within me.” He said slowly. “And you understand what shadows I always seek to suppress. But in the end, one thing remains clear. I am alive, when others are not. My brother, my family… others who have been taken as slaves and who died in bonds. Those who were slain not far from this place — I think of them often, and wonder what value my life had over theirs that I should have been spared. So I have done my best, since then, to be a loyal retainer and servant to the Emperor who freed me. He has been my anchor — for his sake, Hyoushin has fought and will continue to fight so long as there is breath in his body. To find a reason why of all people, I survived… this has been difficult. To account for that, I must make this existance of mine worth something. Even if that something ends in sacrifice, it is a burden I must bear. For the sake of all slaves — I must fight.”

“I don’t think it was a coincidence you survived. I don’t believe in coincidence at all.” Myoume shook her head. “You were meant to live, to meet Kintsusei-sama, to raise Kaiga Aoiketsu with the values he’s taken so strongly to heart. You were meant to do all those things — that’s why you were spared. Your life always had that meaning… somehow.”

“I don’t know if I believe so strongly as you do that all fate is predetermined.” Hyoushin shook his head. “If it is so, then there is little point in us doing anything at all. The world may end, because you have already seen it so. Why are we here, if it is impossible to

prevent these things?"

Myoume sighed.

"Because *Hikari* is here." She admitted. "And whilst I don't think… that things I see can be changed, she makes it different. She's not from this world, and she's not governed by its rules."

She cast a glance across the cavern to where the young girl was sleeping.

"She's so young, and so innocent in many ways." She murmured. "Idealistic and kindhearted, but there is a strength within her. Something people of this world cannot quantify. She's from the Miko's world. They alone can change the destiny of the ShijinTenchishou. She's not bound by my predictions. She's helped create them. While Hikari is here, Hyoushin, there's hope that things can be changed. She's the only one who can do it."

"I see." Hyoushin's expression softened as he followed his companion's gaze. "Such a heavy burden for one so young."

"It is." Myoume agreed. "But… it's the only hope this world has. Seiryuu no Miko has come to Kutou. We have to make sure she raises the God, no matter what happens to any of us."

"On that I think we agree." Hyoushin responded. "But even so, if that destiny can be changed, Myoume, so perhaps can your own. If you lose your hope, you will lose everything. People in this world… they are born with nothing but life ahead of them, and when they lose that will to live, they might as well release their grip on existing. Life is not always easy. Sometimes it is hard — immeasurably so. But it must still be lived. It is a challenge each of us must face. To throw it away without due care and consideration is never the right answer. Remember that, tomorrow, when you face your brother. There may yet be a way to break your own prediction. Don't you think so?"

Myoume was silent for a moment, digesting this. Then she shrugged, offering him a sad smile.

"I wish I felt that confident." She admitted. "But thank you, anyway, for trying. You have a kind heart yourself, you know — even though you don't like to lay yourself open to those things. I understand why Aoi respects you so much, even when you draw yourself away behind your impassive shell. Hyoushin is still the Meihi Lilaihi at heart, isn't he?"

Hyoushin looked rueful.

“I thought he was dead.” He confessed. “Until I saw my sister, and realised that I could not so easily evade my past. I don’t know, at present, what relevance his existance has, or what part of me is him. I have… many questions and no answers… many things I don’t want to think about, yet begin to realise I must. So for now, I will focus on this and this alone. If there is an opportunity afterwards, maybe then I’ll know whether Lilaihi’s spirit is still that strong inside of me. I had thought that I was truly just Hyoushin now — the Emperor’s man and Imperial guard of Kutou. But I don’t know. Maybe not, after all.”

He slipped his fingers into the folds of his cloak, pulling something out and at the sight of it, Myoume gasped.

“Why do you have that?” She demanded, and Hyoushin glanced at the broken, bloodstained arrow, shrugging his shoulders.

“It’s a good reminder of how easily I almost let myself be slain through carelessness.” He said frankly. “I asked Chichiri for it before we left, and he located it and gave it to me. I think he understood, when I told him… I wanted to remember not to act so recklessly when my Emperor’s safety is at stake. I have valued my own life too little and therefore put his in jeopardy. So I wanted the arrow that struck me — so I would not forget.”

“That’s a little strange.” Myoume murmured. “That arrow — what’s left of it — was one of Miramu’s barbs. I can’t believe you’d want that near you.”

“Well, I am strange.” Hyoushin admitted. “But there is another reason for my bringing it. It is proof of the manner of my assault, also. I do not believe Kintsusei-sama ordered my assassination. The weapon is evidence of conspiracy… so it has two purposes, not just one.”

He sighed, sliding the battered implement back into his clothing.

“You are the only one who knows I carry it.” He added. “And I would prefer it to stay that way… at least for now. I do not think Aoiketsu or Maichu would understand my reasons.”

“I’m not sure I do, entirely… but I won’t break your confidence.” Myoume made herself more comfortable against the hard stone wall. “Tomorrow is a big day for you too, after all.”

“True.” Hyoushin acknowledged.

He glanced at his right hand, turning it so that the light caught the edges of the faint criss-crossing whip-scars that marred his pale skin.

“The most important years of my life were spent in bonds.” He

murmured. “I learnt only to evade death and punishment, and work to the expectations of those holding the whips. I did not think for myself — I taught myself to forget all good and happy things, so that they would not jar against the terrible ones and make me wish for better days. I took life only as it came to me, and did not look forwards or back. Until I had Aoi in my charge, such was still my philosophy. And even when I did… he was my concern, not myself. I wanted him to fulfil his destiny and Kutou’s, too.”

He sighed.

“Perhaps it’s true to say that I haven’t really lived these past eighteen years.” He admitted. “Even though I was freed, I have not been able to fully understand or embrace that freedom, because I was so conditioned not to know what it means to be free. To make my own decisions has frightened me, so I have not done so — I have just existed. But since I was forced to act outside of my Emperor’s will — I have had noone’s shadow to hide behind. That’s why I realise now how important it is to have that flicker of hope. Since I saw Rayi in Hokkan — since I came to Kounan… since things inside of me began to change, I’ve seen things differently. We shouldn’t just exist, Myoume. None of us, no matter how long or short our time. We should… we should *live*. Even if it painful, or even if it is hard to bear. We *must* grasp hold of that freedom we have and try to move forwards. Somehow.”

“Forwards… towards the dawn.” Myoume whispered, and Hyoushin nodded.

“Yes.” He agreed. “That is an apt analogy. Always towards the dawn, whatever the new day might bring.”

Myoume frowned, pursing her lips, then she shrugged.

“Aoi’s back.” She said quietly. “I can sense the pulse of his spirit… just as you’ve said, he’s come back safely.”

“Good.” Relief flickered in Hyoushin’s heart. “Then we can hear his report, and hope he has learnt something of use to us.”

“You’re still awake?” At that moment the soldier himself stepped into the chamber, pausing as he registered his companions. “I thought everyone would be fast asleep by now.”

“Someone has to stand guard, don’t they?” Myoume chided, and Aoiketsu nodded.

“Yes, but I know you can do that without needing to sit up and watch for trouble.” He replied, dropping down in front of them. “And

Hyoushin-sama… I don't mean to be rude, but… shouldn't you… rest?"

"Maybe." Hyoushin acknowledged. "But the water from this place has helped my spirits and my injury. I am all right, and not as tired as I might have been."

He eyed the boy curiously.

"Do you have a report to make to me, Kaiga Aoiketsu?" He asked softly, and Aoiketsu frowned, pursing his lips as if considering something carefully. Then, slowly, he nodded.

"Yes sir." He agreed quietly. "I do. About the Shinzahou — and other things."

"Then make it." Hyoushin gestured with his good arm. "I would like to hear what you have discovered, and so would Myoume, I'm sure."

Aoiketsu shot Myoume a hesitant glance, and Hyoushin's eyes narrowed as he interpreted the flicker of indecision in the boy's gaze. Then Aoiketsu nodded again, spreading his hands.

"The Shinzahou are sealed in a vault beneath Seiryuu's shrine." He said carefully. "Kikei's made the mages put a barrier around them that only he and Hikari can get through. Or at least, sort of. I mean, the barrier seems… to be of the kind of magic that if anyone penetrates it other than the Miko, they would be… struck down."

"And you have located this barrier?" Myoume's eyes were bright with curiosity, and Aoiketsu nodded.

"I went to the shrine, and I saw it." He agreed. "I decided… I should. There are stairs down from the main shrine itself, but I don't think… that during the day, Kikei will be far from that place. So… I had… another thought."

He hesitated again, then sighed.

"The magic surrounding the place is pretty strong." He admitted reluctantly. "I couldn't get near without it pricking at me, and I could only see one direct way into this place from the shrine itself. But I thought… that the barrier… is mage magic. I was… the idea was put into my mind that maybe there's another way. I mean, Hikari… can't get there on her own. But… maybe… if she had Doryoku's help…"

He faltered, glancing across the chamber towards where Shishi was peacefully sleeping.

“I don’t know if it would hurt her or not.” He confessed. “Shishi, I mean. When Doryoku took her over before, it… it put a big strain on her body.”

“It did.” Myoume looked grave. “But if you’re right about the kind of barrier around those treasures, it sounds as though Doryoku alone might be strong enough to penetrate it. If she was to take control of Shishi’s body — albeit briefly — they might be able to get through. And Hikari can’t go there alone — it’s too dangerous to abandon her, even with Suzaku deep within her.”

Aoiketsu closed his eyes briefly, then nodded, seemingly making up his mind.

“There was someone within the palace who… wanted to help us.” He said softly. “I can’t tell you who, not at the moment. It’s too difficult — too much relies on it. But they… they were the one who told me about the barrier and the mage magic. And when I went there, it was all how they had told me it would be. So I… I believe in them and their advice. This person said that the only way Hikari can get to the Shinzahou and try and raise Seiryuu unmolested is if we take care of the problem of Kikei and I think that’s true. Much as I want to be with Hikari — I don’t think I’ll get through that barrier. But if… if Shishi could use Doryoku to break through into the vault a different way, and… and somehow manage to help Hikari reach her goal… if we…”

He faltered, and Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed.

“Is this unexpected ally someone in whom we can trust?” He asked softly, and Aoiketsu shrugged.

“I don’t know.” he admitted. “But it’s the only lead we have.”

“When I spoke to Chichiri, I said something about Seiryuu’s ally lurking in Kutou’s palace.” Myoume looked thoughtful. “Even though I didn’t know it’s meaning then. Is *this* person Seiryuu’s ally, Aoi? Is that why they chose to risk their safety in telling you this information?”

“I don’t think that they’re Seiryuu’s ally, Myoume.” Aoiketsu shook his head. “But I still… I believe them. And I want to do things… the way they suggested. It might be a trap — I don’t know. But even so… I think it’s the best way of handling the situation. If Shishi is willing to let Doryoku have her head, and can take care of Hikari in that respect, if the rest of us confronted Kikei and kept him occupied… then he couldn’t interfere in the Miko’s business. If we could keep him within the main shrine itself, perhaps — then Hikari’d have a chance to raise Seiryuu behind his back.”

“Hyoushin, what do you think?” Myoume shot the Meihi a glance, and Hyoushin was silent for a moment, contemplating. Then, slowly, he nodded.

“I believe there is no safe answer to this problem.” he said gravely. “But I do not find a flaw in Aoiketsu’s reasoning. Trap or no trap, it is better that we soldiers are in the presence of Kikei and the Emperor and are able to do our duty protecting him from his traitorous priest. You too, Myoume — you should remain with us, since you will be of no use to Hikari if things are as Aoi describes. And Kikei has some spiritual power… so your own may well be needed in that case. It will be a dangerous step… but I think we must take it.”

Myoume sighed.

“Then that’s what we’ll do.” She said frankly. “Very soon, the sun will rise over Kutou. Today will be a defining day, Hyoushin. Either the sun will set this evening over a land at peace… or… it will fall over a land devoid of life itself. Such is the task that awaits us… whatever happens, we can’t afford to fail.”

Chapter 24

Chapter Twenty Three

"This is Kutou's capital city, huh?"

Shishi glanced around her, chewing absently on her lip as she took in their surroundings. Along each side of the narrow streets, people of various ages and sizes were beginning to emerge for the day's business, some robed in the garb of travelling traders whilst others, dressed in the torn rags of the city's poorer elements clustered at corners, waiting for the chance to earn or beg a day's food and water. Children and adults alike worked to bring the street market to life, and although the wares were somewhat limited in their range, it was no different from the general market trading that the young bandit had seen in Souun for most of her life. In fact, she realised, if it had not been for the occasional scorch marks on some of the older buildings, or the heaped rubble that lay around the broken walls of abandoned, battle-destroyed properties, it would have been easy to forget that there was a civil war going on at all.

"For a country at war, things seem pretty calm right here."

"This is the centre of the Emperor's power, so it is relatively secure." Hyoushin agreed, nodding his head slightly in acknowledgement of her words. "Sadly that is not something which has been maintainable for the whole of Kutou. At different times, different elements of rebellion have risen up across Kutou's land. The most recent was in the territory between this city and the southern border that divides us from your own land. The blame has likely fallen on Kounan's influence, but I am coming to believe that it is all part of Kikei's plan to weaken the Emperor and make him more dependant on his Priest's advice."

"That would fit with what we already know quite nicely." Myoume said grimly. "All right. How far is it to the palace? Even cloaked as you are, Hyoushin, you're bound to attract attention — we can't cover all of you, after all, and even if this is the land you were born, I don't see any Meihi in the streets of the city. You stand out. And besides, we both know that walking anywhere takes its toll on you at present. You were a little warm when we left the cave — if it's too far…"

She faltered, and Hyoushin shrugged his shoulders.

“I believe it is not too far for me to reach the palace successfully.” He said mildly. “I do not feel as weak as I did when in the south.”

Shishi cast him a doubtful look, taking in his faintly flushed features and the tired, pained expression that glittered in his amethyst eyes.

“You sure don’t look much better.” She said bluntly. “Are you sure you’re gonna get there without fallin’ down?”

“In my Emperor’s name, you’d be surprised at what I was able to achieve.” Hyoushin sent her a faint smile. “But Myoume is right about my appearance. Even with my hair loosed around my face, and dressed in this attire, someone may yet associate me with the disgraced military Commander Tou Hyoushin. It is not wise for us to remain on this path.”

“There will be palace guards around, too, who may recognise Aoi and I.” Maichu added. “But I know a better way — a less crowded way — if you trust my navigation. There’s a series of streets and passages that aren’t patrolled so regularly, and I know the usual times of the guards thanks to living in that place for so long. Aoi probably does too — so I’m sure we can get there.”

“Secret passages, huh?” Hikari eyed him curiously, and Maichu shrugged, a faintly ironic glint in his dark eyes.

“Escaping patrols after curfew is rather a talent of mine.” He admitted ruefully, catching his Commander’s gaze as he did so. “It doesn’t always work, but… I… got quite good at it.”

“Yes, I can imagine.” Hyoushin said softly. “But yet, in this circumstance, Maichu, I think we’ll overlook the manner of your learning. Tell me instead one thing — this route of yours will take us towards the rear of the palace?”

“Yes, that’s right.” Maichu looked surprised. “Isn’t that the best place to head for? We’re going to the shrine — right? It’s easier to get there from the back than the front, and the rear entrance is easier to negotiate.”

“Spoken like a true professional in the sneaking department.” Myoume snorted, and Maichu shrugged.

“Soldiers need to get out and about from time to time.” he defended himself. “And it ain’t hard when you live within the walls to learn the weak points in the defence. It’s gonna help, ain’t it? Stop complainin’. I’ve got to have some use, after all, now I’m here.”

Aoiketsu cast his friend a quizzical glance.

“Maichu, this path of yours is going to go right through the red light district, isn’t it?” He said quietly, and Maichu shrugged his shoulders.

“It ain’t the same kind of place in the day as it is at night.” He said carelessly. “Noone will mistake you for a courtesan at this hour, Aoi — don’t look so worried.”

“Red… light… district?” Shishi repeated, and Hikari shivered, pulling her cloak more tightly around her body.

“I’ve had enough men trying to drag me away since I got to this world.” She said emphatically. “What if we get mistaken for local employees? Myoume, Shishi and I are all girls, after all. We might.”

“I doubt it.” Maichu said frankly. “I mean, Myoume… might. But then she’s freak-ass scary when she wants to be, an’ I doubt any sensible person’d want to tangle with her too much once they’d realised it. Besides, I told you. At this hour, you won’t find any trouble. All last night’s clientele are either back in their beds, barracks or sleepin’ off the alcohol someplace discreet.”

Hyoushin sighed, shaking his head slowly in defeat, and Maichu eyed him sheepishly.

“Sorry, sir.” He added apologetically. “I guess I probably snuck out behind your back a few times before this.”

“Hang on.” Shishi put her hands on her hips, glaring at Maichu indignantly. “Myoume might, but Hiki an’ I wouldn’t? What’s *that* meant to mean, Maichu?”

“I wouldn’t have thought it’s a compliment, Shishi, to have a soldier liken you to a prospective prostitute.” Myoume said wryly, and Shishi shook her head impatiently.

“That’s not it.” She objected. “He’s implying that the pair of us are kids, and I hate that. Hiki an’ me aren’t babies, all right?”

“Don’t even try and answer that.” Aoiketsu held up his hands, casting his bewildered friend a knowing look as he did so. “We don’t have time to dig you out of the hole afterwards. Just lead the way, huh? We’ll trust your navigation. The route I took last night was fairly open, and in the light of day, with the Commander too — we’d attract too much attention.”

“I guess that makes me tour guide.” Maichu relented, nodding his head. “It should be fine, though. An’ we’ll get there more quickly if we

take this route. Besides, strange folk are more or less expected in that quarter. Noone will even look at us — it's kinda how it is."

"You are a really sick jerk, you know that?" Shishi said frankly. "Shit, I guess it is true, after all — that bein' a soldier is an excuse to grope women an' drink alcohol."

"I wouldn't have thought bein' a bandit was much different." Maichu shot back. "Besides, that ain't true. It's just like I said. Sometimes with all the trainin' an' shit, a guy has to get out an' let his hair down some. That's all."

"What about you, Aoi?" Hikari cast Aoiketsu a suspicious look, and he sent her a startled glance. "Did *you* let your hair down in this place, too?"

"*No*!" Aoiketsu's eyes widened and a slow flush rose in his cheeks as he realised her motivation for asking. "No, of course not!"

"It's all right, Hikari." Maichu cast her a grin which was very close to his usual rogueish, carefree one. "I only ever got him to this district once that I can remember. He got drunk pretty quick, passed out an' almost got mistaken for one of the tavern whores by a very drunken market trader. If I hadn't been with him…"

He shuddered, shaking his head as Aoiketsu's red cheeks deepened in colour.

"Shut up!" He protested. "It wasn't like that! You made me drink more than I was ready for, and then… it wasn't my fault, and I didn't… you… it was you and Kayu, and…"

He faltered, biting his lip as a shadow crossed his friend's features.

"Kayu." Hikari murmured. "He really was your friend, wasn't he?"

Aoiketsu nodded slowly.

"War breaks up friendships and families, though." He said sadly. "I'm sorry, Maichu. I didn't mean to… drag up a memory like that."

"It's all right." Maichu said softly, shaking his head. "It's how it happened, after all. Forget it. Just follow me… it's this way."

He set off down the street, and, after exchanging glances, his companions headed after him.

"I shouldn't have said that." Aoiketsu berated himself, as they crossed into a rougher and less well populated area of the town. "I wasn't even thinking about it, but right now…"

“Maichu has a demon to face which will haunt him a while yet.” Hyoushin said softly. “It makes me angry, Aoi, but you are not to blame. You should keep that memory of yours — the memory of your friend as it was before all of this. Don’t let the war or his manner of death taint the fact that he was once your comrade and that you enjoyed spending time in his company. For Maichu’s sake, I think… it would be better to remember Kayu as he was, not how he died.”

“Yeah.” Aoiketsu nodded slowly. “I think… I couldn’t do anything else. I’m angry too — but not at Maichu or at Kayu, really. At Kikei… I’m really angry at Kikei. But not at anyone else. It’s just what I said… war breaks people up. And I’m sick of it. I’m sick of war.”

“So is everyone.” Shishi said, her tone unusually thoughtful. “Aoi, while we’ve a chance, tell me again what this mystery informant of yours spilled out last night? I mean, about Doryoku — how did they even know about that? Hyoushin-san was the only one from Kutou who saw her rise inside of me that time, an’ it ain’t like he had much chance to report that back to Kutou’s bigwigs — right?”

“I don’t believe I discussed it with anyone, in fact.” Hyoushin agreed. “As you say, the manner of my dismissal rather prevented me reporting even to my Emperor on the matter.”

“I suppose that’s less important than whether the informant’s information is true or not.” Myoume reflected. “It’ll be dangerous, either way.”

“I think that it was true, what they said.” Aoiketsu said slowly. “But there’s not much I can say about it other than that. I’m going to catch up to Maichu before he disappears off on his own, going at that pace. You guys hash it out among yourselves — I’ve told you all I know about it.”

With that he hurried off in the direction his friend had gone, hauling him back with a strong, friendly, arm, and Myoume frowned, her gaze drifting after him.

“If Aoi’s source *is* right — if that barrier was erected by the mages, then it’ll consist of powerful magic.” She reflected. “You’ll have to let Doryoku take full control of your body again, Shishi, like she did in Hokkan. And you’ll have to trust everything to her to enter the shrine. Any hesitation… you might not survive the experience.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt on my account.” Hikari said quickly. “I really don’t, Shishi. Especially if Myoume is…”

She faltered, biting her lip, and Myoume’s gaze softened.

“Don’t think about that.” She said gently. “Think instead of why you’re here, and how important that is. No matter what happens to any of us, Hikari, you must succeed in raising Seiryuu and in making the wishes you’ve come here to make. If you can do that, nothing else matters. Remember that even if all of us who are with you die today, you still have a world and a family waiting for you to go back to them. When you’ve done this, you can go home. Don’t let yourself be swayed by our fates. Your duty here is far more important and you mustn’t hesitate either.”

Hikari was silent for a moment, then slowly she shook her head.

“I hated this world, when I came.” She whispered. “But I’ve come to… to understand it. Even like it, in parts. The people here are important to me — Chichiri and his family, Tasuki and the mountain, Shishi… you, Myoume… Aoi and everyone else I’ve met along the way. How can I not care if those people are hurt? It’s not possible. I’m too involved with you all to be that cold.”

“Even so, you must do the Miko’s duty and raise the God.” Hyoushin said quietly. “If you fail, everyone will die, not just a handful of people willing to take the risk and fight. Remember that when you enter the vault and face the mages.”

“Suiko and Kitora, huh.” Shishi’s eyes narrowed. “Well, it’s all right. Doryoku says she’ll help, and I’ll trust her — I do trust her. She’ll get me in and I won’t leave Hikari’s side. Somehow Do-nee and I will defend her, and it’ll be okay. I’m resolved, and I’ll make sure Hiki is too. You can count on me.”

Myoume smiled.

“I have no doubts on that score.” She admitted. “You’re as determined as your father, when you want to be — and I’m glad you are.”

“We’re not going into the shrine proper, are we?” Hikari asked hesitantly, and Myoume shook her head.

“No. The rest of us will, but you and Shishi won’t.” She agreed. “It’s better that we occupy the Priest and the Emperor while you get past the mages. You have a tough enough job as it is, after all. We’ll buy you as much time as we can, all right? Shishi, does Doryoku fully understand what we’re asking her to do? When you freed Maichu, you split the rock — right? You’ll have to do the same to break into the vault from outside — do you think that’s doable?”

“Do-nee says so.” Shishi agreed. “I’m going to leave it in her hands

and trust her judgement to get us inside the shrine. Then I'll do my bit, too — but for that part, I think it's down to her. She knows better than me, after all, what her power can do. And I've learnt a little — but I guess I'm still some way from being perfect."

"There's not been time for you to practice much." Myoume said regretfully. "But do your best. You too, Hikari. We'll be counting on you both."

Hikari frowned, a haunted look touching her hazel eyes. Then, slowly, she nodded her head.

"I know." She agreed. "And it'll be all right. Somehow… I won't let you or Kutou down. No matter what, Myoume. Somehow… I'll find a way to do this."

"It is well that you find your resolve now." Hyoushin reflected. "Because we are very nearly at our destination. We will soon part ways — and whether we meet again or not is unknown. But you have Suzaku's strength, and Shishi has Doryoku's. I will trust that this will be enough to get you through."

"Almost there?" Shishi looked startled. "Shit… I guess this really is a quick cut. But… that wall… is that…?"

"The rear of the palace. Yes." Hyoushin said lightly, and Hikari's eyes widened in horror as she registered the severed heads that adorned it.

"Those aren't… real, are they?" She asked faintly, and Hyoushin cast her an odd look.

"Not real?"

"Those heads." Hikari swallowed. "Please tell me they're not… real people's… heads…"

She faltered, and Hyoushin nodded.

"The traitors of Kutou are displayed thus." He said simply. "I imagine they are the heads of those who killed Koku Maru and his regiment through uprising in the Southern Province… although it is somewhat difficult to tell now they have been there for some time."

"I think I'm going to throw up." Hikari bit her lip. "You can't be serious. What kind of people think it's a good decorating idea to stick severed heads on the outside walls of a royal palace?"

"It's not an uncommon tactic, Hikari-chan." Myoume offered her a smile. "I doubt that Reizeitei-sama subscribes to it, because the

general elegance of Kounan's palace forbids it. But a soldier King rules here, and in a land where unrest is constantly needing to be put down. Traitor's heads are unpleasant to look at — that's the point of doing it. To remind people that rebelling against the Emperor holds terrible penalties."

"Indeed it does." Hyoushin reached across to brush the hilt of his sword with his good hand. "So has this blade been employed at times in my Emperor's name. Though none of the heads currently on display are my handiwork — I have never shirked from that duty if it is a traitor to the Emperor."

"I thought you were a Meihi!" Hikari objected. "And that they believed in peace and stuff. How does decapitation fit into the peace ethic?"

"It does not." Hyoushin said frankly. "It is a vestige of Hyoushin's duty, not of my own heritage. I am not a good example of a Meihi — my hands have been stained with the blood of one who has fought in battle many times. I apologise if it distresses you, Hikari. But this is Kutou. This is precisely why you are so needed. So that there is no longer a necessity for such distasteful modes of punishment."

He offered her a faint smile.

"In most cases, the men are dead before the head is struck." He added. "And even if they are not, it is a quick, clean blow. There is no additional suffering — even when their crime is as great as treason against the Emperor himself."

"I don't need the details of it." Hikari held up her hands. "I don't want to know any more. It's bad enough that it happens! And that we've got to… somehow… get past those things to get into the palace grounds!"

"That's easy enough." At that point Maichu turned, offering her a grin. "There's a soldier's entrance somewhere along here… an… er… unofficial one, but one everyone in the barracks knows about. We can slip in that way."

"Everyone in the barracks?" Myoume cast Hyoushin a questioning glance, and Maichu looked rueful.

"Perhaps not the ones in charge." He amended, and Hyoushin offered him a rueful smile.

"You would be surprised at what we know, Maichu." He said lightly.

“You mean… you *know* where we’re going?” Maichu looked somewhat discomfited, and Hyoushin inclined his head slightly.

“I would be a poor Commander if I did not know my men’s movements.” He said calmly. “But since I do not currently hold any official authority over you, you need not worry about being disciplined for such knowledge.”

He shrugged.

“On the contrary, your tactic seems a sound one. Lead on.”

So it was afoot.

From his alcove beneath the glittering blue roof of the Kutou royal palace, Miramu observed the group of travellers slip carefully and purposefully through the hidden passage, stepping cautiously into the courtyard at the rear of the grounds as they glanced around for any over-zealous guardsmen on duty. As his gaze fell on one of the cloaked, stiff figures, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully, and he slipped his fingers absently against his quiver, running his touch pensively against the shiny metal barbs that lined his arsenal.

“So Aoi really was telling the truth.” He reflected. “Somehow you *did* survive my curse, Hyoushin. I should respect you for that, shouldn’t I? That your boasts about the Meihi were not idle ones after all. Yet your movements are the movements of a man on the verge of giving up — is it truly worth that much to you, then, to see your Emperor again?”

A wry, humourless smile touched his lips.

“Well. Maybe you are his lover after all.”

He tilted his head on one side, remembering Aoiketsu’s hot indignation when he had made the suggestion on their ride south.

“Or perhaps this is just a case of loyalty stretched to extremes.” He acknowledged. “It is foolish, but maybe I underestimated that Meihi will of yours. Who would have thought that Suiko witch was right? You aren’t so easy to remove after all. And now…”

His gaze flitted to the female members of the group, darting over Hikari, then Shishi, and resting finally on his sister. His gaze softened, and he slowly shook his head.

“I bring chaos. I bring death.” He muttered. “And today will be no exception to that rule. It is, after all, the only way I have ever lived. I

brought pain by being born, and I continue to bring it every day I am alive. I'm sorry for that, Myoume — that you've come so far under such a huge shadow. Today I'll make you cry, I've no doubt about that. But I… I've made my mind up. What's to be done… and that's that."

He fingered the arrows again, watching as the group divided into two. As he sat there, he saw the young, red-haired bandit grab the Miko by the arm, giving her a little tug as they headed off in a direction Aoiketsu had indicated. Hikari had faltered, glancing back at the group, and as he had watched them, Miramu felt a flicker of sadness stir within his soul.

"How pathetic." He murmured ruefully. "The angst of a teenage girl torn between her duty and her love for a mere Kutou soldier. With such emotions, can she really control the power of Seiryuu? I wonder. Still, that other child… the flicker of Genbu's magic flares from her now like a beacon. When I saw her the last time, she was just an ordinary bandit — but now she's something else. If Hikari has that strength, too — maybe she'll somehow pull it off."

He shrugged, getting to his feet as he prepared to alter his own location.

"Those things don't concern me, after all." He reflected. "I have other things to do. I don't have much time, and I have to be ready for what I intend to do."

He touched his bow gently, a look of resolution glittering in his eyes.

"*Two* people will die in that shrine today, if I have my way." He said softly. "I'm sorry, Aoi, that I didn't tell you all the consequences or facets of my plan. If I had, would you try to stop me? Probably. Almost certainly, judging by the way you spoke to me last night. Still, assassins never do tell the whole truth when they enter into a deal. Devils must act on their own will more than anything else… so long as Myoume is safe, nothing else matters to me. Kutou, Byakko, Seiryuu… all are incidental. So long as I protect my sister… that's all that counts."

"I still don't understand why you've brought me here so early in the morning, Kikei."

Kintsusei stepped into Seiryuu's shrine, pausing to meet the dazzling azure gaze of the impressive dragon statue that loomed over them. There was a glitter of something that appeared to the troubled

Emperor to be judgment in his gaze, and he faltered, biting his lip as he found himself compelled to look away.

"I cannot even meet Seiryuu's gaze." He added softly. "This is not the place which I would choose to be at present."

"We are all running short of the time to make choices, Heika." Kikei said briskly, folding his hands in the voluminous sleeves of his robe as he did so. "If it was not so, I would not have requested your presence at such short notice. But things are moving swiftly — I have had word that the girl, Sukunami Hikari and her travelling companions have entered Kutou. More, that they have somehow made swift progress towards the palace and the vault where I have secured the Shinzahou."

"Towards the…" Kintsusei's dark eyes widened and he stared at his companion in alarm. "Seiryuu no Miko is… coming here? With… people from the South?"

"So it seems." Kikei inclined his head. "Miramu seems to have seen or heard something regarding it, and he reported the information back to me. You need not look so concerned, Heika — I have taken precautionary steps to prevent any foreign agents from infiltrating such a precious place. The mage spirits are protecting the Shinzahou, and the spell will not permit anyone but the Miko to enter. I have told Miramu to kill any who try to oppose us — diplomatic negotiation is not something that we are able to enter into with a land like Kounan, after all."

"Kill…?" Kintsusei frowned. "I'm not sure that slaughter within the palace is a good idea. There could be political ramifications, and…"

"I'm sure these are not people who would think twice about harming *you*, my Lord. That must be my priority." Kikei said simply. "Have you forgotten that they have withheld our Miko from us — possibly even brainwashed her into believing their lies? And not only that, there are likely bandits among the party — bandits who may have the blood of a Meihi on their hands."

"Hyoushin." Kintsusei's eyes darkened, and slowly he nodded his head. "Yes. I understand your meaning. The time for discussion and caution is over… if we can persuade Seiryuu no Miko to our cause, Kutou need have nothing left to worry about."

"And then, my Lord, if you truly seek revenge on those who slew your companion…" Kikei trailed off, and Kintsusei's gaze became resolute.

“This is something I must have, for my own peace of mind.” He said softly. “Hyoushin was my friend, not just my protector. Of all men, I trusted him.”

“I understand your faith, and your grief — although it still troubles me that he was in the South and that he went there so directly.” Kikei said evenly. “Without reporting his thoughts to you — that makes me still wonder what his true aims were.”

“I do not believe that Hyoushin betrayed me.” Kintsusei shook his head emphatically. “The word was one he didn’t even understand, when first I took him in. No, Kikei. Your protection of me is beyond reproach — but I will not believe him capable of such deceit.”

“It’s amazing what men can do when circumstances become desperate.” Kikei murmured. “Still, the situation remains the same. For whatever reason, he chose not to tell you his suspicions. And probably, because he travelled without such protection, it cost him his life. There are, after all, many nefarious folk in the South. We know this from our own dealings with them in the past — men who will slay as soon as look at someone from other lands. With his unusual, distinctive appearance, I’m sure he must have attracted much attention.”

He spread his hands.

“Such is the tragic fate of the Meihi.” He added softly. “Hyoushin is not the first of his people to be slain on account of his appearance, and likely will not be the last. I am sorry for your loss, Heika — but you must go on without him at your side. He is, after all, beyond our reach now.”

“Not quite true, I’m afraid, Kikei-sama.”

The voice was soft-spoken, yet distinct and familiar, and at the sound of it Kintsusei swung around in disbelief, sure that a spirit had descended from the heavens in order to make contact with them. In the doorway of the shrine stood a figure, the bright light from the hallway behind him making him appear more of a ghost than ever.

He was robed in unfamiliar village costume, the dark colours of the rough Southern-dyed fabric somehow in stark contrast to his fair complexion. Any ties which had held his thick mane of hair back from his face had clearly long since been lost, since his straight silver hair lay loose and untamed across his shoulders, and there was a glint of something in the amethyst eyes which made Kintsusei’s breath catch in his throat. There was nothing of the smart, unflappable military officer in this interloper’s appearance, and yet there was no doubting

the man's identity, for at his waist hung the familiar, distinctive carved hilt of the blade which he himself had presented to the tribesman so many years earlier. Yet even so, Hyoushin seemed almost like a stranger stood before him, for in all the time he had known his Meihi companion, he had never seen so much emotion flicker through that often impassive violet gaze.

He swallowed hard, struck speechless by the unexpectedness of the interruption, and from his sudden tension, he could tell that Kikei had felt the same way. The Priest muttered something under his breath, and Kintsusei half wondered if it was a spell of exorcism, for at that moment he almost suspected that the apparition before him was not man at all, but an angry soul come back to wreak his revenge.

As the man strode forward, however, the illusion was broken, and the Emperor noted a faint hesitation in his movement. He frowned, his sharp eyes soon picking up the way the Meihi's arms were folded across his chest, as if the man was in pain but trying to conceal it. He bit his lip, somewhat unnerved to see his old friend moving towards him in such a way, the usually guarded, impassive gaze open and flaring with a mixture of emotions.

"Hyou… shin?" He whispered, and the man paused, meeting his gaze for a moment in silence. Then, and without a word, he pulled his sword from its scabbard, dropping it on the floor at the Emperor's feet. It did not escape Kintsusei's notice that the gesture was performed with his right arm, rather than his stronger left, and the Emperor wondered with a jolt whether Hyoushin's usual sword arm was the cause of his friend's discomfort.

"As you see, my Lord, it is not so simple as Kikei-sama thinks, to slay a Meihi."

He spoke in soft, even tones, but for the first time in eighteen years his expression betrayed the true anger that lurked beneath the man's words.

"Kintsusei-sama, I present myself to you as proof that I am not dead… and I give you my sword as proof I have not come here on any enemy-bound errand, as your Priest would have you believe. Contrary to the words of snakes, I am not a man whose loyalty can be bought. And if my Emperor seeks to put an end to my life, then I have come to him in person, for it is his deed to do, not the deed of a rogue assassin with a quiver full of poisoned barbs."

His voice shook slightly, and with a jolt Kintsusei heard the tint of a Meihi accent touch the edges of his companion's normally featureless

tones.

“Hyoushin, what is the meaning of this?” He murmured, holding out his hand to his friend. “They told me you were dead… slain at Suzaku’s hands. Yet… here you are…”

He faltered, and Hyoushin’s eyes glittered with contempt once more as he flung his right hand in the direction of the startled, slightly discomfited Kikei.

“You should ask your Priest.” He said softly. “It seems that he felt I was a threat to your Majesty’s success, and so he took steps to ensure that I would be so no more. I can only imagine that he thought me some kind of a traitor — although on what treason I cannot imagine. I have been to the four corners of this world in search of Kutou’s peace, my Lord. But I will *not* be slain at the hands of a Sairou rogue. If you seek my death, then do it, by all means. But at least honour our friendship enough to do it by your own hand. After all, my life is yours to do with as you will. I will not fight you, if you choose to slay me. And if you believe me a traitor, then you must do as you see fit. In consideration of what will follow, I feel it almost better to die swiftly at the hands of an experienced soldier than in the aftermath of what is to come.”

“I don’t understand.” Kintsusei shook his head in confusion. “Hyoushin, why would you imagine I… or Lord Kikei, for that matter — would ever want to see you dead? You’re not acting at all like yourself, and it’s worrying me — what ails you? What has happened? Why do you confront me in this manner… I don’t understand?”

Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed, and Kintsusei was aware of the same icy flare of hatred searing up inside of him, just as it had done all those years before when he had confronted the soldier in the sacred cave.

“Lord Kikei’s man, Miramu.” He said softly, reaching into the folds of his cape and pulling out the remains of the blooded arrow. He glanced at it, then tossed it towards the Emperor, who caught it, staring at it in disbelief. “I was attacked and left for dead. Clearly someone felt I was in the way.”

“Miramu…” Kintsusei’s eyes widened, and he turned, sending Kikei a startled look. “Kikei… do you know anything about this?”

“Miramu is a rogue — a mercenary who acts for whoever pays him.” Kikei shook his head. “The story that reached me told me Hyoushin had been slain in Kounan. Probably the Suzaku warriors sought to end his life, so paid a higher bid for the man’s services. He has no overriding honour, Kintsusei. That he would act so towards one

you trust grieves me — but you must believe that this was not of my doing."

"On the contrary, Kikei-sama, I have every confidence that it was of your doing." Hyoushin spoke coldly, and Kintsusei shivered at the ice in the man's tones. "Perhaps because I have come to learn a good many things, over the course of the past few days. Things which, if my Lord Emperor came to hear of them, might make your position more tenuous. You are, after all, the one who compelled Kintsusei-sama into this course of action. Gathering treasures, stealing relics, raising mages from their sleep. All in pursuit of Kutou's peace, or so you said. But it's not the truth, is it? It's not your final ambition. At the end of all of this, Kutou will have peace — sure enough. But at what cost, Priest? At the cost of all living souls?"

"Hyoushin, you're rambling. Your eyes are wild… you're not making any sense." Kikei said frankly. "What poison tainted that arrow I don't know, but you…"

"*Shut up*!"

Before Kikei could finish his sentence, a fresh voice interrupted the conversation and as all eyes turned to the door, Kintsusei stared in shock at the young soldier who stood there, sword drawn and eyes blazing with anger. Behind him, one of his fellows stood ready to pull his own weapon at a moment's notice, and something about the clouded darkness in Maichu's gaze told the Emperor that something serious had occurred since the last time he had seen his wayward men. And yet, it was Aoiketsu and not Maichu who drew most of Kintsusei's attention for, far from the well mannered, gentle young man he had seen grow at the Imperial Court, the soldier who stood before him had the look of a resolute killer about him, anger and indignation glittering in his seiran eyes as he advanced towards them.

"Shut up, Kikei! You're lying! Stop trying to compromise Hyoushin-sama's word in front of the Emperor!" He exclaimed. "Hyoushin-sama could have died — he's come here even knowing that it might kill him, to stand before Kintsusei-sama and tell him the truth. The truth you tried to prevent him from hearing! You are the only one tainted, not the Commander! *You* are the liar, not him!"

"Aoiketsu, you forget yourself!" Kintsusei found his tongue at last, and Aoiketsu hesitated, as if registering the fact he was within the shrine and before his Emperor. He stood for a moment, then he dropped to his knees, his grip not loosening on his weapon. As he did so, Kintsusei caught sight of the glittering ruby and pearl of the hilt and his eyes widened in disbelief.

“That sword…” He murmured, and Aoiketsu raised his head, meeting his Emperor’s gaze.

“Suzaku’s sword.” He said frankly. “Hotohori-sama’s *shinken*, entrusted to me by Seiryuu no Miko and Reizeitei-sama of Kounan to do what’s best for this world.”

“Suzaku…” Kintsusei breathed, and Kikei’s beady eyes narrowed as he spied an opening.

“So it seems they *are* traitors after all, my Lord.” He said evenly. “To come before you with a foreign weapon drawn — and to feed you lies about those who have remained by your side. You should not let them sway you — Hyoushin is clearly on the verge of madness, and as for the young fools who follow him blindly…”

“We don’t follow anyone blindly.” Maichu said darkly, his fingers closing around the hilt of his own weapon. “I’m sorry, Kintsusei-sama. If you want to put me to death for drawing my weapon in the shrine, then that’s all right by me. I’ve come too far to not go any further — and that Priest… I’m not going to listen to him tell any more lies. Kayu… Kayu is dead because of him and his manipulations and I *won’t* let that go.”

“*Kayu*?” Genuine distress flared in Kikei’s gaze for the briefest of instants, followed by anger. “What do you mean, you stupid boy? Why would I want to see that young man dead? Kayu is like my son… why would I want anyone to bring him harm?”

“*You* sent him to Kounan to find Suzaku’s treasures.” Maichu said blackly. “Because of that, he’s dead. Because of you and your schemes. I promised myself I’d avenge Kayu one way or another. So I will. Even if it means my head is spiked outside next — I *will*.”

He made to lunge forwards, but before he could do so, the final member of the group made her presence known, grasping him by the arms and pulling him back as slowly she shook her head.

“*No*, Maichu.” She said softly. “I know how you feel, but no. We will talk first. That’s why we came. No blood… not yet. There is far too much at stake, in this holy place, to start fighting.”

“Who are *you*?” Kintsusei stared at the stranger in confusion as Maichu struggled in vain against her grip. “Why are you here, and giving orders to my men… what has happened and why have I not been made aware of it? All these things flying around — a man of Kutou with the sword of Suzaku, a strange woman and my old friend, risen from the dead as if a ghost before me… I don’t understand any

of these things! How is it… what is going on?"

The strange woman raised her gaze to his, and as he saw the odd glitter in her blue eyes, suddenly he realised who she was.

"*Toroki*?" He murmured, and the woman slowly inclined her head.

"Forgive my rudeness, Kintsusei-heika. I'm not here to offend or inconvenience you at all." She said softly, her gentle Western tones somehow soothing and hypnotic to the ruffled Emperor's senses. "But I spoke a prophesy to your men in Sairou, and I feel I should repeat it to you, here and now, so that maybe you can understand the reasons we are here… and how it is that your soldier Aoiketsu bears the sword of Kounan in his grasp."

"You can't seriously be going to listen to the babble of a foreign witch, Heika?" Kikei sent the Emperor a doubtful glance. "She's half-mad, that's for certain — just look at her, with that glint in her eye. Miramu has often said as much, and he's right — she's crazy, driven mad by the things she's seen."

"Probably." Myoume agreed, even as she released her grip on Maichu's arm and stepped forward. "Yet there is no help for men who close their ears to warnings."

"I will hear her out, Kikei." Kintsusei raised his hand to prevent the Priest's interference. "Speak, Byakko no Toroki. Why do you invade my shrine and corrupt my men in this way? Your involvement has been twisting through this for long enough — I want to know your motivation in all of this!"

"To prevent a prophesy visited on me when I was ten years old." Myoume said simply. "A prediction whereby the whole of this world would be ripped to shreds and destroyed, and each and every soul living in it would be turned to dust. From Emperor to beggar, none would be spared. This is my one and only motivation. To save the lives of all those people, even at the cost of my own."

"I see." Kintsusei frowned, gazing at the young woman as he tried to work out whether or not she was telling him the truth. "And for this reason you have come to Kutou? Is it true that, even being of Byakko's people, you have allied with Kounan and even become involved with Seiryuu no Miko?"

"Seiryuu no Miko is not with me — as you can see, all who accompany me are the soldiers Aoiketsu and Maichu, and their Commander, Tou Hyoushin." Myoume said evenly. "But for you to hear my prophesy, Heika — that is enough. As I told your men in

Sairou, one of tribal birth would betray you, and turn the world to darkness. That man is your Priest, Kikei. It is not the Meihi Hyoushin, whatever you may or may not have been led to believe."

"Kikei?!" Kintsusei's eyes widened. "But… that's not…"

"It's ridiculous." Kikei snorted. "You know nothing about me, or my work for the Emperor, wench. Nor do you have any knowledge of my heritage, either. You are grasping at straws, when it's quite clear that *Hyoushin* is the one your prophesy speaks of."

"I thought so myself, to begin with." Myoume admitted. "But I was mistaken in my judgement. I did not know that Kintsusei-sama was supported by a Hin priest. Once I knew that, then it became far more clear."

"How could you know that?" Kintsusei demanded, and Myoume shrugged.

"I am Toroki." She replied evenly. "That is all."

"And you expect us to believe this?" Kikei raised an eyebrow. "That a man who fled into Southern clutches is actually here to save the Emperor, not to harm him?"

"Hyoushin-sama is a Meihi!" Aoiketsu snapped. "They have honour, Kikei — something which obviously the Hin do not!"

"What would *you* know about the Hin, you pathetic boy." Kikei's expression darkened. "They are gone — slain — and at the hands of people such as your family and those before them. You have no right to speak about honour, when you bear the blood of the Kaiga family!"

A flash of fire entered Aoiketsu's seiran gaze at this, and despite himself, even the Emperor was taken aback to see it.

"Shougun…" He whispered, as for a fleeting moment he saw the spirit of his long dead Commander rise up within the young boy's eyes. For the first time since Aoiketsu's birth, he saw a true resemblance between the fearsome, golden-headed Hin Seishi and his dark-haired, half-Eastern son.

"Do not insult me." Aoiketsu's voice shook, as he fought to keep his grip on his rising temper. "I am *no such thing*. Kaiga Aoiketsu does not exist. I have done no harm to anyone of tribal blood and I have *every* right to speak of the Hin in whatever way I choose to. After all, *I* am a man of tribal blood. Just as you are — *I am Hin*."

"What kind of nonsense are you speaking now?" Kikei demanded, and Aoiketsu's eyes narrowed, flickers of blue fire dancing between

slitted lids and the Emperor bit his lip, remembering the way Nakago had glared at his enemies from atop his horse, in the moments before giving the order to slay the Kaiga family.

"No mercy." He realised. "Just the will for revenge. Aoiketsu — is this the legacy your father bequeathed you after all?"

"Aoiketsu, calm yourself. I have already told you I will not tolerate that reaction — here or anywhere else."

Hyoushin did not raise his voice, but something in his tone seemed to penetrate the young soldier's rising fury, and he stepped back, seemingly remembering where he was and who he stood before. He cast his Emperor a troubled glance, then turned his attention back to the disbelieving Priest.

"I am *Gi* Aoiketsu." He said quietly, sounding much more like his usual self, and though the seiran eyes still flickered with indignation, Kintsusei realised that the boy had regained his self-control. "Gi Ayuru was my father. If you do not believe me, I'm sure the Emperor will bear me out. *Nakago* sired me, Kikei. I have Hin blood, just like you. But *unlike* you, I choose to fight for my Emperor and my country. The Shougun sought to bring new life and peace to Kutou — he was one of Seiryuu's chosen and he sought to change this land! I'm not him, and I don't have his power. But I will do something to help continue what he started. And if that means killing you — then that's what I will do."

"Gi…" Despite himself, Kikei paled, and slowly Kintsusei nodded.

"The boy is right, Kikei." He agreed quietly. "He *is* Nakago's son. Kaiga Gin did not sire him. Gi Ayuru did. It was *Aoiketsu*'s diluted blood that broke through Suiko's shrine seals… he is truly the son of Seiryuu's chosen Shougun. And if you look at him, you can see it in his face."

He frowned.

"I still don't fully understand what this meeting is about." He admitted. "Why you have come here… and Miramu, why Miramu has not…"

"Miramu has not, and will not." Aoiketsu said evenly, fumbling in the folds of his clothing for something and drawing it out. As he did so, Myoume let out a gasp, disbelief flooding her seiran gaze.

"Miramu's dagger!" She whispered. "Aoi-kun — why do *you*… have that?"

"Miramu won't be rescuing anybody, or interfering in our

progress." Aoiketsu did not meet the prophet's eye, as he tossed the distinctive, carved dagger down to join Hyoushin's own discarded blade. "This is my proof of that fact. Miramu is dead. Kayu is dead. Your path ends here, Kikei. With us."

"Miramu is…?" Colour drained from Myoume's face at this, and she cast the young soldier a horrified look. "Aoi-kun, what do you… how can you… what do you mean? That isn't possible… Miramu isn't…"

"As I said." Aoiketsu said flatly. "Miramu *is* dead. Would I have been able to take his weapon so easily, if that wasn't the case? He hurt my Commander and I couldn't forgive that. He killed Hikari's friend and I can't forgive that, either. He deserved to be stopped, Myoume… for everyone's sake. He's no longer an obstacle in our path… or a shield for you, Kikei. So I suggest you start telling the Emperor the truth about your plans and your actions, before we come and slit *your* throat, too. I'm not afraid of blood — not this time. Whatever hesitations I might have had then, I seem to have got over them and moved on. Maichu, Hyoushin-sama and I came here with one goal and one goal only — to eradicate the threat behind our Emperor's throne. And, quite clearly, Kikei — that threat is *you.*"

"No kidding." Maichu muttered. "I don't want to be tricked into spilling any more blood but his blood… he's messed with things once too often and I won't forgive that, either."

"Kikei?" A flicker of concern flared through Kintsusei's senses, and he turned to face his Priest, his unease growing as he took in the expression on the older man's face. The Hin's lips had thinned, his dark, penetrating eyes as hard as glass beads as he stared from the gathered intruders to the Emperor he had crowned almost twenty years before. For a moment nothing moved. Then, at length, the man sighed, bringing his hands together beneath the heavy folds of his robe once more.

"This is inconvenient." He said lightly. "To think that a warrior of Miramu's calibre could be defeated by a boy like you, Aoiketsu. Kayu always said you were skilled — well, do I have you to blame for that, too? Do you bear the blood of your friend on your blade, when you come here claiming to act in your Emperor's name?"

"No. That was me." Maichu said frankly, and Kikei's eyes widened as he stared at Maichu in disbelief.

"*You*?" He demanded. "*You* killed Kayu?"

"Yes." Maichu said evenly, though Kintsusei thought he detected a slight waver in the young man's voice. "He tried to kill my

Commander. I'm trained to defend my allies — even against my friends. Kintsusei-heika doesn't believe Hyoushin-sama is a traitor, nor did he discharge him of his duties. I believe that — I believed it when I left Hokkan and I believe it now. But Kayu wouldn't listen. He attacked an unarmed man, and that's a coward's deed. To attack the Emperor's ally is also treason, and I've been trained to fight traitors, no matter what the risk. So I fought him. And I won. Because in the end, I was stronger than he was."

"Hyoushin, this is true?" Kintsusei turned horrified dark eyes on his Meihi companion, who slowly nodded his head.

"Hei Kayu was a puppet." He said quietly. "Sent into foreign lands on the whim of an evil manipulator. He was not a traitor to his Emperor. He was a fool — but in the end, he left Maichu with no choice. It was a quick, decisive battle. And Kayu was killed."

A cold feeling began to curl up within Kintsusei's heart as he glanced from the Priest to the Commander, indecision and panic fighting for control of his heart as he tried to gauge the rising levels of tension that were beginning to stifle the atmosphere within the shrine.

"Kikei has supported me since he first came to ask me to take the throne." He said slowly. "Hyoushin has supported me as my defender since that day, also. How should I doubt either of these men, whose actions have ensured that I am still Emperor after so many years of civil strife?"

"Kutou's civil strife is suspiciously close to the areas where war protégés of Kikei's are currently established." Hyoushin said coldly. "Kayu was simply the culmination — he was not the first puppet. Forgive me, my Lord, but if this continues, you will only serve to be his next one."

Kintsusei's eyes widened at this unusually direct criticism, and Hyoushin bowed his head slightly as if in apology.

"I have come too far to speak in any way other than the exact truth." He said frankly. "We do not have the time for anything else."

"Time, you say." Kikei's eyes narrowed, and he nodded. "Very well. If it is time that concerns you, Tou Hyoushin, I'll give you plenty of it — time in a different world to this one, where you are no longer a thorn in my side!"

Before Kintsusei or any of the gathered intruders could react, he had thrust his palms together, muttering something under his breath as his fingers became encased in a soft, blueish haze. He pursed his

lips, eying Hyoushin as if he were no more than a rat scurrying across the floor of the shrine. Then he pushed his hands forward, sending a flare of eerie, bitter flame across the chamber towards where the Meihi stood.

Although in comparison to the Seishi magic that Chichiri and Myoume both wielded Kikei's sorcery was weak, the force of his hatred clattered against the pale-skinned man's battered, fever-ridden body, knocking him flying as it made contact with his skin. He tumbled to the ground, his head striking the hard stone floor as he fell, and as the haze of strange light faded and died, the Meihi lay crumpled on the floor like a broken china doll.

"*Commander*!" Aoiketsu darted forwards, dropping down at Hyoushin's side as he tried to rouse the fallen man in vain. "Hyoushin-sama! Dammit, Kikei, you're going to pay for that!"

"Stand back, boy, or you will be next." Kikei said darkly. "I have heard enough. I will not listen to any more. I've worked far too hard for far too long to let anyone interfere. Stand back or I *will* kill you next. You may be Nakago's son, but you are *not* him and you have nothing with which you can fight my sorcery."

"Kikei!" Disbelief flooded Kintsusei's expression, followed by horror as he realised the truth of the situation. "You… you mean you… *have* been plotting against me? All of this time…"

"Not exactly, Heika." Kikei shook his head, even as his fingers glittered blue for a second time. "You've not been in my line of fire. As I've told you many times, you are the only claimant to this throne. To lose you would be to incur anarchy of a level even I don't seek. But to maintain some control on Kutou, I've been forced to go through this petty procedure of maintaining the civil unrest. At least, until it reached such a level that Seiryuu no Miko would be drawn here. With her power — with the power of the Shinzahou — at last I won't be shackled any longer. This powerless position has trapped me for far too long, and I am tired of it. I don't intend to die a weak shrine Priest, with no political power or influence in this world. I will be more than that."

He offered the Emperor a cold smile.

"Your choice is simple, Kintsusei-sama." He added. "I have use for you — I have no desire to kill you. So long as you are compliant, I will not kill you. It all depends on you — and on how much you value this existence you call a life."

"Kikei!" Maichu exclaimed, anger flaring in his dark eyes. "I told

you, I'll slit your throat first! You're not going to hurt the Emperor — dammit, you're not going to leave this chamber alive!"

"I'm not afraid of you." Kikei said scornfully. "By your own confession you betrayed a friend and stained your hands with his blood. Kayu was not my puppet, Shi Maichu. He was my adoptive son. And *I* will be the one to avenge him — by sending *you* to face Seiryuu's justice."

The haze of blue around his hands brightened, and Myoume let out an exclamation, reaching across to pull Maichu back.

"Look out!" She exclaimed, and Maichu started, staring at her in bemusement.

"I can see his stupid magic — I'm not going to let him hit me." He objected, but Myoume shook her head.

"No. Not that. Not that." She murmured. "Something… else."

"Something else?" Aoiketsu cast her a startled look, then his eyes opened wide with realisation. "Something…"

"You lied, and despite my senses I almost believed it." Myoume said reproachfully. "Aoi-kun, it was a low blow… what are you trying to achieve?"

Before Aoiketsu could respond, however, there was a whoosh of air and something shot through the middle of the chamber, piercing the stone mere inches from the place that Maichu had previously been standing. As the soldier let out an exclamation, Kintsusei's eyes widened with disbelief as he realised what it was.

"An arrow." He whispered. "But… surely…"

"I guess you're seeing a lot of dead people today, Heika." A voice from the rafters cut across him, and Kintsusei glanced up, seeing a black-clad figure perched against the beams, his bow slung carelessly over his arm as he toyed with a second arrow. "My apologies — I imagine it must be quite a shock."

"Miramu!" Kikei exclaimed, and the assassin slowly inclined his head in an amused, lazy nod.

"That's me." He agreed. "At your service, as ever."

He glanced at Aoiketsu, and a faint smile touched his lips.

"I guess it's now about to become interesting." He said softly, twitching the arrow against the fibre of his bow string. "Now I'm here, the party can really get started."

Chapter 25

Chapter Twenty Four

"I guess from hereon in we're on our own, huh?"

As Aoiketsu and his group of companions headed off towards the main body of the shrine, Hikari cast her bandit ally a sidelong glance, apprehension glittering in her hazel eyes. "Just you and me… do you think we can really do this and get past the mages' guard?"

"There isn't really an option for failin', so I guess that means we can." Shishi said frankly. "Besides, there ain't jus' the two of us. Do-nee's here too, remember? That makes three."

"True enough." Hikari managed a faint smile, reaching out to touch her friend on the arm. "I'm glad you're with me at least, Shishi. I couldn't go in there on my own… as it is I'm fighting the urge to turn and run away."

"That's also not an option." Shishi shook her head. "But you need Do-nee to get into this place, right? We're goin' underground — ain't that the deal? So we need her power to split the earth an' land a direct hit on the place."

"That's what Myoume said." Hikari agreed. "Is Doryoku all right with that? I mean…"

She faltered, remembering the meeting between the two mages within the heart of Reikaku-zan.

"Aren't the mage spirits like sisters in magic or something?" She added doubtfully. "Doryoku acted that way with Hisei, when we were down south. Will she really want to fight against Suiko and Kitora, just because we ask her to?"

"She will." Shishi said evenly. "She's promised, and I believe her. Besides, sisters in magic or not, it's me she's tied to. Not them. She's more focused on helpin' me an' you than she is preservin' any kind of ancient acquaintance. Stop panickin' already, will you? We're wasting time."

"I suppose so." Hikari bit her lip, glancing around her at the silent, eerie palace grounds.

"Doesn't it seem odd to you, though, that there are no guards

about?"

"Yes." Shishi admitted. "Though if Aoi has an ally within the palace somehow, maybe that accounts for it. But it is strange that we ain't seen anyone. This *is* a royal palace but noone's challenged us. Security can't be that lax, surely?"

"Unless it's a trap and we're being lured into it."

"Possibly." Shishi acknowledged. "You *are* the Miko, after all. An' they probably want to get a hold of you, if they do know who you are. Maybe that's it. Either way, though, trap or not we know where we're goin'. Doryoku, I need your help for a minute, okay? Myoume said you'd need to possess me to break right through — so I'm goin' to trust you not to wipe me out by doin' it. Okay? We're a team an' I'm handin' you the baton — don't let me down, huh?"

She closed her eyes, and as Hikari watched, her friend was bathed in a gentle shimmer of silver light. For a moment there was silence, then Shishi's eyes flickered open, and Hikari saw the glint of another's spirit deep within her gaze. She swallowed hard.

"Doryoku-sama?" She murmured. "Are you… will you… let us get in?"

"I told Shishi I would, so I will." Though Shishi spoke, the inflection and intonation of her words were the mage's, and Hikari felt faintly comforted by the gentle resolution in the spirit's speech. "Stand back, Hikari. I will need to split the earth, and I do not wish to cause harm to one Shishi wants to protect."

"All right." Hikari nodded, doing as she was bidden as she watched Shishi bring her arms up before her, clasping her hands tightly together as she closed her eyes once more in concentration. She murmured something too soft for the young schoolgirl to hear, and with a sudden flash of light, something juddered and shook the earth beneath their feet. Hikari let out a gasp, grabbing out for the nearby palace wall as she saw the ground slowly begin to split apart, great dark cracks spreading like the criss-crossing of spider webs across the stone-covered pathways. Dust and sand scattered through the air, creating a cloudy haze as slowly Shishi drew her hands apart, a bright silver gleam coating her entire body as she fixed her full attention on the fine, hair-like cracks. Little by little, as Hikari watched, the mage's divine power gradually and gently divided the ground in two, and although she saw the earth cleave before her, she was no longer aware of the ground's shaking beneath her feet.

Cautiously she let go of the wall, taking a hesitant step forward as

Shishi turned, holding out a hand to her companion.

“Come with me, Hikari.” She said softly, and from the glint in her eye Hikari knew that Doryoku was still fully in control. “So long as you do not release my hand, you will not come to any harm. The earth is my friend — it will obey me. And I can take us where we need to go.”

Hikari hesitated for a moment, then her resolve hardened and she nodded her head, reaching out slim fingers to take Shishi’s cool, sword-calloused ones.

“I’m counting on you — both of you.” She said softly. “Please, Doryoku-sama — get Shishi and me inside.”

The bandit smiled, a more gentle, comforting smile than Hikari had ever seen cross Shishi’s face, and she nodded.

“Then come, Seiryuu no Miko.” She murmured. “This way.”

Hikari felt the grip around her fingers tighten as slowly she allowed herself to be led forward towards the widened crevasse in the ground. Although there was no obviously safe way down, Doryoku did not hesitate, and Hikari forced her fear aside, reminding herself that this was not just Doryoku guiding her, but Shishi’s will as well.

“Shishi wants to help and protect me, doesn’t she?” She murmured. “That’s why you’ll do this for us — because you and Shishi are linked now, and that’s not going to change.”

“Shishi asked for my help and I have given it.” Came the mage’s answer. “But I cannot inhabit her body for long without returning her to consciousness. She is not yet strong enough for me to do so, and even though it is her will, I do not want to put her at risk. It takes a lot of power to control the earth, Hikari. Though my power will be available to you within the vault, I will no longer be in full control of it. When we enter, I must return control to Shishi — else it will be the worse for her.”

“That’s all right.” Hikari assured her, as they descended slowly towards what seemed to be a large slab of cracked, splintered concrete that lay below them. “So long as you can get past the mages’ magic, that’s enough.”

“Shishi believes in your power, so so do I, Seiryuu no Miko.” Doryoku said softly, reaching out a hand to touch Hikari’s cheek. “For this reason I’ve undertaken Hisei’s request as well as Shishi’s own. You are not only Kutou’s hope, but hope for all of this world. Take courage, all right? I don’t think that fact will be overlooked, when you

come to face your opponents."

"What do you mean?" Hikari looked startled, and Doryoku merely smiled.

"We are going in." She said simply, spreading her free hand before her as a blast of silver energy split the concrete slab cleanly apart, clearing a way through to a chamber beneath. "Hold on tightly, Hikari. We are about to touch the mage barrier… it may not be pleasant for a moment or two, but bear with it. We will emerge safely the other side."

"All right." Hikari agreed hesitantly, inwardly bracing herself as she saw for the first time the strange, ethereal glitter that surrounded the chamber beneath them. "Wait… that sparkle… is that it?"

"Yes." Doryoku confirmed. "And below it, the vault which houses the treasures of Genbu, Seiryuu and Byakko."

"And the mages of Seiryuu and Byakko, too." Hikari murmured, as she caught the briefest glimpse of something moving beneath the haze. "All right. I'm ready, Doryoku-sama. Let's do this."

Doryoku offered her another smile, then nodded her head, and Hikari felt a sudden tug on her arm as she was pulled deeper into the chamber that lay below. For a moment there was a prickling, tugging sensation, as something pulled against her skin and she closed her eyes, taking a deep breath as she focused on keeping calm. Then, as soon as it had begun, it was over and Hikari found herself standing in a strange, ancient chamber, dust and grime coating the once vivid imagery that coated the walls and ceiling all around them. Faintly she could make out Seiryuu's dragon form in the dirt, but before she could focus on it, she felt Doryoku's grip on her hand loosen, and she cast her friend an anxious glance, realising that the mage had pulled back and returned Shishi to herself.

The bandit put a hand to her head, rubbing her temples as she struggled to regain her bearings, and instinctively Hikari reached out to support her, glancing around her as she did so.

"We're here, Shishi." She murmured. "Doryoku… she did what she promised and we're inside."

"I'm glad about that, considerin' I feel yanked to pieces." Shishi's own familiar tones came back ruefully, and secretly Hikari was relieved to hear it. "Well? We got through that barrier, then, I guess… this is where the Shinzahou are?"

"Yes." Hikari took a faltering step forward, her gaze falling on

something in the furthest corner of the room. “Over there. Look. Three pedestals — those are the treasures we’re looking for, right? Seiryuu’s earring, Byakko’s mirror and Genbu’s necklace. The three remaining Shinzahou of the Gods.”

“Looks that way.” Shishi pulled out of Hikari’s grasp, approaching them as she reached out to touch the nearest one. However, as her finger drew near to the edge of the mirror, a spark shot out towards her and she gasped, pulling her hand back as she glared at it indignantly.

“What the hell?”

“I guess there are barriers round those, too.” Hikari said resignedly. “When we came down here, Shishi, I thought I saw someone in here. But… I don’t see anyone now. Do you?”

“No.” Shishi shook her head. “No, but Doryoku says she can sense them. They’re watching us, Hiki. Those mages we have to find and neutralise in order to be able to use the Shinazhou. We gotta keep alert — else they’ll get us for sure.”

“Thanks for that.” Hikari frowned. She moved towards the furthest Shinzahou, reaching out to brush her fingers against it.

“*This* one is Genbu’s.” She said thoughtfully. “And there’s no barrier here. Shishi, Doryoku is Genbu’s mage, isn’t she? With this treasure… this one… could we separate her from you so she can fight on her own? After all…”

“Genbu’s Shinzahou, huh.” Shishi frowned. Slowly she shook her head.

“I promised Do-nee not to abandon her.” She said softly. “So I can’t go against that, now. If we raise her, Hiki, we have to defeat her, too. And if that happens, she’ll be… re-sealed into her relic, won’t she? I don’t want to do that to her. I can’t… even if she is trouble sometimes, she and I are sort of…”

She sighed, rubbing her temples again.

“It’s hard to explain.” She admitted. “But I lost Jin and I’ll lose you, when this is over. I don’t want to lose all my allies, and Do-nee… for all her peculiarities… I’ve kind of started to like having her there. Now I’m used to it, after all.”

“You children spend a lot of time talking about rubbish, you know.”

Before Hikari could respond, a soft, purring voice echoed out of the blackness behind them and both girls swung around, horror and

apprehension in their eyes as they registered the fact they were no longer alone in the ancient chamber. The woman who stood before them was undoubtedly something beyond human, robed in odd fabrics of brown and green, and at her throat the schoolgirl recognised the Chinese character for tree. Like Doryoku and Hisui, she had the illusion of youth, with thick waves of snow-white hair curling across her shoulders and down her back. Stray wisps framed her face, highlighting the odd gold glitter of her eyes, and with a jolt Hikari realised what it was about this stranger that was so unusual. Although she stood before them in the form of a woman, her gaze was decidedly feline, and something about her demeanour and bearing indicated that she was a hunter, her senses primed ready for her next kill.

She snickered at Hikari's blatant scrutiny, sauntering daintily towards them, and again Hikari was struck by the figure's similarity to a prowling cat in her deft, careful movements.

"Kitora." She whispered, and the mage's eyebrow twitched up, amusement sparking in her odd golden eyes.

"So my reputation precedes me?" She reflected softly, the roll of her words almost like the purring of a self-satisfied house-cat as she eyed them both coquettishly. "Or are you just educated in the legends, little girl? As you say, I am Kitora… though if you know that, I'm surprised you still stand there. Surely such knowledge should have made you flee by now?"

"We aren't fleeing anywhere." Shishi said indignantly. "I'm not afraid of you, and nor is Hiki. We're here for a purpose, and we're not going to let some catwoman creature get in our way."

"You really *are* just children." Kitora's eyes gleamed with spite as she surveyed them. "Making such naive, idealistic judgements. Of course you're afraid. I can taste your fear, you know — both of you. You can't fool a mage of Byakko so easily."

She tilted her head on one side, pursing her lips, and as she did so, Hikari caught the briefest glimpse of sharp, pearl white cat's fangs within the woman's mouth. Involuntarily she shivered, realising her first impression of a predator had probably been closer to the mark than she'd realised. Briefly Jin's death and the conflict within Sairou's shrine struck through her thoughts, and she drew her cloak more tightly around her body, resisting the urge to turn tail and flee.

"One of you is *truly* the hallowed Seiryuu no Miko that fat Priest seeks to exploit?"

Kitora brushed a hand against Hikari's arm, and the girl flinched at

the sudden, electric sensation that ran through the mage's touch.

"But you came through our barrier, so one of you must be." She said resignedly. "Though we didn't expect you to bring a friend. Still, that is easily settled."

She turned her head, and for the first time Hikari became aware of another shadow lurking in the darkest corner of the shrine.

"Suiko, stop sulking and be useful." The mage snapped. "Which one of these two brats is the one that Priest wants us to keep? I'm getting bored down here waiting, and the other one's fair game for us to play with. If she's not the Miko, after all, she doesn't matter."

"Suiko." Shishi murmured, as the second figure stepped reluctantly into the centre of the chamber, her azure eyes sullen and resentful as she glared at her kittenish companion. Despite herself, Hikari's breath caught in her throat as for the first time she met gazes with Seiryuu's own chosen spirit. This was the one who had been quickened by Aoiketsu's blood, she remembered, and something about that connection gave her renewed courage. She was here for Seiryuu's sake, after all, she reminded herself.

As her sisters were, Suiko was undoubtedly beautiful, and as elementally ethereal as the fire-driven Hisei hidden deep within Reikaku-zan's caves. However, an entity more opposite to Hisei would have been hard to imagine, for everything about Suiko's being glittered with her connection to rippling water, from her long flowing hair to the eyes that gleamed like sapphire pools. If it hadn't been for the dissatisfied, sulky glint in those eyes, Hikari mused, she would almost have seemed like a Goddess in her own right, and she reflected that beside Suiko, Kitora's more forest-like colouring almost looked plain and dull.

"Don't tell me what to do, you smelly, Byakko-cat witch." Suiko snapped now. "You're not my mistress, and I don't have to do anything you tell me to do."

"Yes, you do." Kitora said frankly, a malicious glint in her strange eyes. "Because we both know that if I wanted to destroy you, I could. So unless you want that, you'll stop being annoying and act. These are just people, after all. They're only brief glimpses of life — nothing more. Tell me quickly — which one is the Miko? You should be able to sense that — or are you so weak that it's beyond you?"

Suiko's eyes darkened, and she tossed her head, folding her arms across her chest.

“You’re not much of a mage if you can’t sense it yourself.” She said petulantly. “It’s so obvious even Kikei could tell it himself from a mile away. Or are your senses so blunted by rat blood that you can’t see the magic of a divine spirit when it stands in front of you? Maybe you aren’t as smart as you think you are, Kitora.”

“I’m warning you, I’m fed up with your whining.” Kitora’s expression became nasty. “If it wasn’t for the fact that by helping that stupid old man we’ll be able to maintain these forms indefinitely, I wouldn’t be worrying about sparing either. But as it stands, I’m fed up of this dry, dusty place. I intend to spill blood here — and I guess, if you’re not going to be explicit, I’ll just have to take my chance as to which one I hit.”

She licked her lips, and once more Hikari had the impression of a hunter preparing to kill and devour her prey.

“*You* look more scaredy than your companion.” She reflected, reaching out to take Hikari by the arm, and Hikari registered the woman’s long, talon-like nails digging into her skin. “I’ll start with *you*, and work my way along.”

“Let Hiki go!” This was too much for Shishi, who let out an exclamation, forcing herself between the taunting mage and her frightened friend. “You don’t lay a finger on her, you witch — do you hear me? Noone’s spilling anyone’s blood here — we’re here to take those treasures away from you and if it means we fight, then we fight!”

“I see.” Kitora’s eyes narrowed, and she glanced at Shishi in interest. “So. Just as I thought. *That* one is the true Miko — your drive to protect her gave that away. Which makes *you* the one who’s expendable… doesn’t it?”

“Shishi, look out!” Hikari cried, as she saw a glint of pure venom glitter in Kitora’s cold, cattish eyes and flickers of strange white magic begin to lick around the tips of her claw-like fingers. “Get out of the way — she’s serious!”

“So am I.” Shishi said resolutely, drawing her sword from her belt as she glared at the Byakko mage defiantly. “I told Aoi and the others that I’d protect you down here and I’m going to do that, Hiki. Whether you like it or not — whether it kills me or not — I promised them and I won’t stand back and let you get hurt. Jin wouldn’t forgive me either, if I did — would he?”

“Jin…” Hikari faltered, and Kitora let out a peal of amused laughter, flexing her fingers as she cast a glance in the schoolgirl’s

direction.

“I can smell the taint of Suzaku on your blood.” She said softly. “You’re afraid, and I can sense it even from here, that flicker of Phoenix magic even without touching you. Well. Who would have thought that this scaredy little girl would be Seiryuu’s Miko *and* Suzaku’s chosen treasure, all in one frail, fleeting body? I wonder if that fool Priest knows what he asked us to snare, Suiko-chan. You sense it too, don’t you? This one has Suzaku’s magic in her blood. That’s why I couldn’t tell she was the Miko. The flare of that firebird is stronger.”

Suiko did not answer at first, and Hikari saw an obstinate look flicker across her blue eyes as she drew her hands slowly together. Then she turned, fixing Hikari with a pointed, almost penetrating look.

“Noone invited you to come here.” She said coldly, tossing her head as she glared at Hikari, unspoken accusations in her eyes. “This place is sacred to Seiryuu — how dare you blast your way through as if you had a divine right to enter here? Kitora is right. Suzaku taints you. You’re not Seiryuu’s while you’re Suzaku’s, girl — and if you’re not Seiryuu’s, you’re no ally of mine.”

“I told you — both of you — stay away from Hiki.” Shishi said hotly, brandishing her sword as wisps of silver magic danced across the tip of her blade. “I ain’t gonna be ignored either, you know — I’m here to protect her and I’m going to do that.”

“How do you propose to do that, little girl?” Kitora eyed her derisively. “Do you think that you are any match for a full blown mage spirit like me? Even Suiko has more strength than you do — you’re doomed to die here, so you might as well sit back and take it quietly. I want to have some fun with you, after all — it’s so tedious if you insist on resisting me.”

“You sound just as twisted as Miramu.” Hikari snapped. “Stop talking like that!”

“Are you offended, Seiryuu no Miko?” Kitora purred, reaching out to toy with Hikari’s long braid of hair. Gently she pulled the ribbon free, running it playfully between her fingers as she did so. “Well, and what do you intend to do about it? Raise Seiryuu? Make him school us to obey him? I don’t think so. You don’t have the strength or the conviction to do either thing… besides, so long as Suiko and I are here, you can’t raise him, can you? I can see it in your eyes — even when you try to be strong, the doubt and indecision is eating you up

inside. You are just a child. I have no reason to fear you — *either* of you."

"It's not just Hiki and me here, you know." Shishi said coldly. "Doryoku is with us."

"Doryoku." Kitora snorted. "The mage who believes in peace and cooperation? The weak-willed spirit who gave Genbu's treasure willingly into the enemy's hands? Do you really think that she'll fight for you, little girl? Suiko may be a warped husk of a mage, but she at least has a spirit. Doryoku is an empty wisp of nothing — she's never won a battle in her life and she never will. Entrusted to that stupid, pointless, snow-skinned Meihi people… all they do is suffer, endure and die."

She cast Suiko a spiteful look, and Suiko's eyes darkened.

"Shut up." She snapped. "Noone asked you about the Meihi… this is about Seiryuu, not one of Kutou's heathen tribes."

"Meihi…" Hikari frowned, confusion flaring in her heart as she interpreted the look that passed between the two mages, and Kitora nodded.

"My sister mage is foolish." She said derisively. "She's so scarred by inferior blood that she's developed fondness for one of them — as if she were some kind of human spirit yearning for companionship after all these years underwater. Even so, though, she's still powerful enough to kill either or both of you."

"Fondness…" Shishi's eyes widened. "Shit, do you mean *Hyoushin*?"

Suiko started, staring at the young bandit in surprise, and Shishi's expression became one of comprehension.

"You *do*." She murmured. "You *were* the one who gave Maichu Hyoushin's sword, weren't you? He told me you did… when he was on the mountain chopping wood, but I didn't register then what it meant. The one who pushed them to go South was *you*… if that's true, why are you fighting us now? Why are you turning on someone who you sent them to find? I don't understand. Hiki is Seiryuu no Miko — you know that, right? If you're really Seiryuu's servant, why are you trying to get in his way?"

Suiko's expression became resentful once again.

"The people in Kutou are foolish." She said flatly. "Why should I help them, when they're stupid enough to slay the few allies they have? Let their Miko die. Let it all fall to ruin. I'm done with it. They

don't listen to me — they see me as a nusiance and a mere woman and not worth anything at all. Even Hyoushin didn't listen — but at least he believed in Kutou. Even if he was a stupid human, at the end of it — he did care about this land."

She gestured towards the Shinzahou.

"Those are under the Priest's care, and the Emperor's will." She added bitterly. "I am tied to them by that fact. They have alienated and slain their allies, and so those allies are alien to me, also."

"But Hyoushin isn't dead." Hikari protested, then she gasped, her hand flying to her mouth as she realised what she'd said.

"Shit, Hiki, do you think you should've told them that?" Shishi snapped, bracing herself as Kitora eyed them sharply.

"*Not*… dead?" She murmured, and Suiko stared at Hikari in disbelief, the haze of magic around her fingers flickering for a moment as she tried to work out if the girl was telling the truth. At length, however, she tossed her head.

"It doesn't matter." She murmured. "It's too late. Everything is too late. They didn't listen… and Kutou will die. Everything is lost… why fight it?"

"Suiko." Hikari bit her lip, seeing a flare of genuine sadness in the mage's expressive eyes.

Kitora snorted, flexing her claws once more.

"So that means we might as well get done playing with these two, doesn't it?" She said impatiently. "Stop your emotional whining. You're not human, even if you think you are. These are our playthings — nothing more. We'll spare the Miko, because Kikei asked us so nicely… but otherwise… they're all ours. He didn't say we couldn't *harm* her, after all. And as for the other one… she's fair game."

Her eyes narrowed, and she flung her right hand out towards the chamber's wooden door. Hikari let out a gasp as the wood buckled and split into sharp barbs, shooting across the chamber towards them like arrows shot from Miramu's bow. Frozen to the spot, she could only stare at them in terror as they hissed through the air towards her, and Shishi's yell only penetrated her consciousness dimly as she was overwhelmed by the feeling she was about to die. Then, as if out of nowhere, something hard and heavy knocked roughly against her, pushing her to the ground with some force as the barbs clattered harmlessly against the chamber's far wall.

Hikari struggled to catch her breath, realising as she did so that Shishi had dived between her and the wooden stakes, pushing her out of the way just in time to prevent her from being impaled. She pulled herself painfully into a sitting position, turning to glance at her friend.

"You idiot, are you just going to let them kill you?" Shishi reproached her, scrambling to her feet as she reached out a hand to pull Hikari up. "At least try and dodge next time, huh? I don't want to go back an' tell Aoi you've been skewered."

"Shishi… you're bleeding." Hikari's eyes widened in horror as she registered the slowly spreading stain begin to colour the shoulder and upper arm of the bandit's shirt, but the girl shook her head impatiently, knocking her friend's concerned hands away.

"It's nothing. A scratch. It's fine." She said impatiently. "Stop worrying about me and worry about yourself… all right?"

"You should take that advice, musume." Kitora's voice echoed out from behind them and as one girl they turned, staring up at the mage in horror as she cast them an amused, wicked smile.

"Well, Suiko… it's almost like hunting rats after all." She murmured. "Aren't you going to play along?"

"And get my hands dirty?" Suiko glowered at her. "You've made that one all bloody, you idiot. Do you think I want to touch filthy Suzaku bandit blood? You do what you want. *I'm* not going to play with something that's damaged."

"Suit yourself." Kitora shrugged, reaching out to grasp Shishi by the arm.

"Well?" She purred. "Where's Doryoku now, then, little girl?"

"Right here." Shishi's eyes glittered with resolution, and a faint haze of silver touched her aura as she pulled herself free. "She's angry with you for hurting me, Kitora. You're not as smart as you think you are. Do-nee might have been as peaceful as the Meihi, when she was with them. But mages are changed by the blood they're connected to, aren't they? And she's hooked into my blood now — my spirit, and my attitude is kinda different from those peace lovin' hippy people from the north country. I'm a bandit an' I fight. So so will Doryoku. If I ask her to, she'll fight damn hard."

"You little…" Kitora's expression became one of annoyance and surprise. "Well, if that's how it is — so be it. She is still not risen. And she might be as strong as me, but your bleeding arm is proof you're not. If I impale you, even she can't save you — how do you feel about

that?"

"*Stop it*!"

Before she knew what she was doing, Hikari had pushed between them, hot anger choking up inside of her as she reached out a hand to shove Kitora back. "Shishi's my friend, and you're *not* going to hurt her. She came here to help me, and I'm not going to see another person I care about killed by one of Byakko's people!"

Almost as soon as she had finished speaking, she felt something warm sear through her, reaching out to the tips of her fingers and her toes as she realised that the dormant spirit of Suzaku that slept within her heart had once more been awoken. She took a deep breath to steady herself as the feeling of power and strength threatened to intoxicate her senses completely, then she turned to meet Kitora's gaze head on, registering as she did so that the fear that had so paralysed her moments before was now nowhere in evidence.

"Jin died because I couldn't prevent it." She said in low tones, her voice shaking as she fought to restrain the bevy of emotions that welled up inside of her. "I cared about him, and I let him down. But I won't let anything happen to Shishi. Or to Kutou, either. I've come here to save people, not hurt them. And I'm not going to lay down and submit to you or your games that easily. Kikei is my enemy and so are you… so if that's the case, I'll fight you, and dammit, Kitora, I *will* win!"

"*Hiki*?!"

Shishi's eyes almost fell out of her head at this, and Hikari sent her a faint smile, although somehow the bandit seemed a long way away from the pulsing, dancing spirit that was flexing his phoenix wings across her senses.

"I'm Seiryuu no Miko and I'm Suzaku no Shinzahou." She whispered. "I'm not just some kid you can push around. So if you want to play with me, Kitora… let's play. I've had enough of people being hurt… if you want to tackle someone, I'm here."

"Shit, what's gotten into you!" Shishi demanded. "Are you crazy? You're talkin' like…"

She faltered, her eyes widening once more.

"Like *Suzaku*." She breathed.

Kitora's expression became dark, and she shrugged, letting out a bored sigh.

“Your existance is nothing more than a heartbeat compared to mine.” She said coldly. “You know nothing about magic, this world, or even the spirit that seeks to manipulate you before me. You’re a naive, silly idiot, and naive people deserve to die. Even if Kikei does want you, he’ll have to peel you off this chamber first. You’ll see what the power of Byakko really is, little girl… and then you’ll wish you hadn’t challenged Kitora!”

As she spoke, her eyes glowed with a strange gold light and her entire aura lit up with a white haze, her hair blowing out around her face in an invisible wind as she flexed her hands once more towards the splintered, battered remains of the wooden door. As she did so, Hikari tensed, feeling giddy and out of control as Suzaku’s protective instinct continued to surge inside of her, wrapping itself firmly around her heart. She would not back down, she knew that — that no matter what the outcome, it was too late to turn and back away. And more, she realised, she didn’t want to. Jin had not run away in Sairou, and Shishi had risked her life on more than one occasion to help her. Now it was her turn, and she would not let them down.

From her left side, she was aware of Shishi readying herself for battle, the glitter of silver making her blade shine with an unearthly glow, and she reached across to take the bandit’s free hand in hers.

“Together.” She whispered. “Shishi… together.”

Shishi stared at her for a moment, then comprehension glittered in her eyes, and she nodded resolutely.

“Ready when you are.” She agreed. “Whatever’s goin’ on inside of you, Hiki — give it all you got.”

“Wretched brats.” Kitora’s eyes narrowed to mere slits as she spread her fingers, sending the barbs flying once more across the chamber. As Hikari struggled to focus her thoughts, she was aware of a silver barrier shooting up between them, and as the wood fell to the floor, she took a deep breath, steadying her wits.

“Thank you, Doryoku.” She murmured. “You protect us, and I’ll fight.”

“That seems somehow messed up, but if that’s how you want it, that’s what we’ll do.” Shishi was the one who answered, but Hikari knew that the Genbu mage had also understood. “I hope you got some of Suzaku’s fire-power in there, Hiki… because shit, we’re goin’ to need it. She’s friggin’ furious now… look at her.”

Hikari’s eyes darted back to the mage, realising Shishi was right.

Kitora had drawn on the strength of the Shinzahou even further, absorbing all of Byakko's magic into her body as she prepared for the kill. She clasped Shishi's hand more tightly, closing her eyes as she reached out a tentative prayer to the God who lived inside of her.

"If you can hear me, Suzaku, help me do this." She begged. "I know you're there — I can feel you, pulsing against my skin. I know you want to protect me — and Shishi, too. You sent Jin to do that, didn't you? He protected me in Sairou, and Shishi in the circus town. So now… please… for Kutou's sake. Help me. I know I'm weak, but with your help, I can be strong."

As if somehow the Phoenix had heard her, Hikari was aware of a sudden flow of warmth engulfing her whole body, and she opened her eyes, registering the faint haze of crimson that had begun to spread out around her own body.

"I can feel it inside me." She whispered. "Suzaku. He's awake, and he wants to fight."

"But can a malformed piece of Suzaku's magic trapped inside a human child really fight the immortality of a divine mage of the west?" Kitora demanded tauntingly. "I doubt it. Your body is still fallible. And if you use all your magic to fight me, you useless fool, how will you raise Seiryuu and save Kutou? You humans really *are* stupid."

"We also manage, when we have to, with what we got." Shishi said stiffly, raising her sword as it once more glittered with silver light. "Okay, Hiki. Ready when you are. Let's do this."

Hikari hesitated, then nodded, holding up her free hand as she drew on as much of Suzaku's strength as she could muster. As it burned through her body, she gasped, struggling for breath as for the briefest of instants it felt like her whole form was being engulfed with flame. Then, as the haze of red energy began to entwine itself around Doryoku's reassuring silver beam, she gathered her wits once more, forcing herself to keep conscious.

"Even so, it's not enough." She realised anxiously. "Kitora's right. Shishi and me are just human. No matter how powerful Doryoku and Suzaku are, they have limits because of us. Doryoku said it as we came in. That we'd have access to her power, but it wouldn't be the same."

As their combined efforts clashed against Kitora's shimmering aura, the mage let out a cruel laugh, slowly shaking her head.

“That’s the best you can manage?” She mocked. “Little girls, you should have known better than to challenge a mage of Byakko!”

“And you should have known better than to attack Seiryuu no Miko, Kitora!”

Before Hikari knew what was happening, another voice entered the debate, and the schoolgirl’s eyes widened with surprise as she saw a flare of pure azure magic shoot out across the chamber, twisting and winding its way through the mix of Suzaku and Genbu magic as it drew them together into one powerful beam of light. As it did so, Hikari saw their own efforts steady and strengthen, battering against Kitora’s shield with a fierce force and despite herself the mage buckled, stumbling backwards as the power of the magic drove directly through her defences.

“*Suiko*!” Shishi exclaimed, and out of the corner of her eye, Hikari registered the change in the petulant mage’s demeanour, absently noting that the sulky expression had been replaced by one of resolve. She drew her hands together, strengthening her flare, and as she did so, Kitora let out a howl not unlike a kitten being strangled as her aura flickered and died, her body falling to the floor with an inelegant thump.

Slowly Suiko lowered her hands, nodding her head in satisfaction.

“That serves you right, dirty Byakko cat.” She said, approval in her tones as she walked over to examine the still form of her fellow mage. “You know, I told you not to annoy me too much, didn’t I?”

“Suiko.” As Hikari felt Suzaku’s spirit calm and fade from within her, she turned to cast the mage a stupefied look, struggling to understand what had happened. “But you… are you… going to… what…?”

“You’re incoherent.” Suiko turned to face them, eying Hikari pensively as she did so. “Well, I suppose if you’re what Seiryuu sent, you’ll have to do, won’t you? Since there’s no going back, and all of that.”

“You mean… you weren’t going to hurt us after all?”

Slowly Shishi sheathed her weapon, eying Suiko warily. “All those things you said… were a lie?”

Suiko shrugged her shoulders.

“I’m Seiryuu’s servant. As you said.” She said softly. “My existance only counts to serve his will and protect his land. Kutou *is* full of

idiots. They *do* turn on each other and wound each other and it's frustrating, but it's Seiryuu's will that I help them, so I do."

She sighed, brushing imaginary specks of dust from her hands.

"Kitora's not dead. She can't be killed like you two can." She added. "She's a mage — her power is exhausted, but only for the time being. So if you're going to act, it's going to have to be soon."

"But… wait a minute." Hikari eyed her in confusion. "You're Seiryuu's mage… and you waited here… to *help* me?"

"Well, of course." Suiko said simply, offering the girl a coquettish smile. "You're Seiryuu no Miko. Who else would I help?"

"Shit." Shishi let out her breath in a rush. "Well… you damn well had me convinced."

"Kitora is stronger than I am. I can't fight her alone, because I wasn't properly raised." Suiko said bitterly. "The boy whose blood woke me… was not one of the Chosen. Kitora knows it — she was raised by dirty Byakko blood, but it was pure Seishi blood, and I can't fight that alone. But you came here… you and Doryoku… and so I waited. I thought… if you had power between you… I could make it count."

"You're smarter than Aoi thinks you are, you know." Hikari said ruefully, and Suiko snorted.

"His blood raised me, so if he thinks I'm an idiot, he must be one too." She said disparagingly. "Still, even so, I am here. And… Hyoushin… he made it to find you, after all? Him and his stupid soldier companion… found Seiryuu no Miko and brought her to Kutou?"

"Sort of." Hikari glanced at Shishi, then shrugged. "He *is* alive… at least, they both were this morning, when we parted ways. I don't… I don't know what's going on in the shrine right now. I just know they went there to distract Kikei and the Emperor while Shishi and I came here."

"Then you really don't have time to waste speaking to me about pointless things." Suiko said matter-of-factly. "You haven't exhausted all your strength, I hope? You'll need it, after all. My master is a strong God — maybe the strongest of them all in some ways. You can't be a feeble-hearted idiot if you're going to save Kutou."

Her gaze softened, and for a moment Hikari saw a fleeting resemblance between the apparition that stood before her and the

soldier who had taken so many risks to protect her.

“Your heart isn’t feeble.” She added. “You defended your friend, and you showed resolve to save this land, too. You *are* the Miko Seiryuu chose… even if you are young, and even if he did send you to Kounan. You *are* the one that the East has been seeking… Sukunami Hikari, will you accept this duty and save Kutou?”

“I came here to do that.” Hikari said softly. “It’s scary, but I realised… right then, when Kitora attacked Shishi, that I wasn’t here to just watch any more. All of this needs to stop — Kutou needs me to stop it. If I’m the only one who can do it, and if so many people have given so much for me to get here… of course I’ll do it.”

“Even though it’s dangerous?”

“Even so.” Hikari said resolutely. “I *have* to. If I don’t, more people will suffer. And that will be my fault, because I didn’t do anything to stop it.”

Suiko’s smile widened, and she reached up to brush Hikari’s cheek.

“He loves you, I think.” She reflected absently. “And you love him — the one whose blood woke me. Foolish human emotions… don’t let them get in your way.”

“I don’t intend to.” Hikari responded. “I know what I have to do. I just… I don’t really know how to… do it.”

“You need to re-seal Kitora and I back into our relics.” Suiko told her simply. “Then the Shinzahou will be free once more for you to summon Seiryuu. Suzaku will guide you — he’ll show you the way. But so long as Kitora and I are drawing on the treasures for strength, the summoning won’t be possible.”

“You’re okay with that?” Shishi eyed the mage doubtfully, and Suiko shrugged.

“No matter what slurs that nasty cat cast against my name, I’m not human and I’m not concerned with life or death like you are.” She said categorically. “I’m Seiryuu’s mage. I will not die — and with you here, I no longer have a purpose to wait. You will fulfil Kutou’s wishes, so therefore my job is done. I should return to my resting place until my master calls me again — after all, I am simply a relic of his magic. Nothing more. Kitora too… neither of us have any right to independant life beyond the will of the God we serve.”

“Doryoku, do you feel that way too?” Shishi murmured, and the relic around her wrist glittered as the mage hazed into view. Slowly

she nodded.

“My will is your will, now.” She agreed. “Suiko is right. We are here to serve our Gods and protect our lands. That is what we are — that is why we require blood to quicken our spirits and give us some semblance of souls. Without that we are just splinters of magic — nothing more, and nothing less.”

“So… next time Byakko calls… Kitora might not be… like this?” Hikari asked softly, and Suiko shook her head.

“She reflects that grubby assassin’s black soul.” She said frankly. “That’s all. Which is why it’s better that we’re re-sealed. In these forms, we’re tainted… that’s all.”

She frowned, eying Hikari for a moment.

“But Hyoushin… does live?” She asked softly, and Hikari nodded.

“He survived Miramu’s attack.” She agreed. “Why?”

“No reason.” Suiko smiled, making a dismissive gesture. “And we’re wasting time. Doryoku, help me confine Kitora’s spirit before she wakes… I’ll submit myself to my scale, but Kitora will fight if she regains strength.”

“As you wish.” Doryoku nodded her head, drawing her spectral hands towards Suiko’s as they pooled their energy, bathing Kitora’s still form in a mixture of silver and blue light. As Hikari and Shishi watched, the predator who moments before had sought to hunt them down disintegrated into brief sparks of white light that darted around the atmosphere for a moment before returning to their resting place within the gleaming white fang that Miramu had stolen from Sairou’s cave. For a moment the fang glowed, then, as the light faded, Hikari saw a haze of magic glitter around Byakko’s divine mirror.

“Byakko no Shinzahou.” She murmured. “The barrier around it is gone… it’s been restored.”

“And now it’s my turn.” Suiko cast Doryoku a glance, tilting her head on one side. “You’ll oversee her, won’t you? This young, silly Miko who runs hot-headed to defend her friends… you’ll make sure she does as she should and saves Kutou?”

“You have my word.” Doryoku said solemnly. “All will be well, Seiryuu no Suiko. I promise.”

“Then my job’s done here.” Suiko looked satisfied. “Seiryuu-sama will be pleased with me, I think. In the end, I managed to get Seiryuu no Miko to Kutou… even if it was hard work to get it done.”

With that she offered Hikari a smile, spreading her hands out before her as her body glowed and fragmented into tiny pieces of azure light that, little by little encircled and then disappeared within the glimmering aura of the chamber's blue scale.

As the light faded, Hikari let out a heavy sigh, suddenly feeling deflated.

"It's sort of sad, that she had to do that." She murmured. "Aoi was wrong after all. Suiko was drawn from his blood, so of course she wouldn't betray me or Seiryuu. And she wasn't the petulant idiot he thought she was. Maybe it was an act — maybe it was just because she wasn't getting things done quickly enough. But I think… somehow… she orchestrated my coming here, don't you? Maichu and Hyoushin's coming to Kounan wasn't coincidental."

"I guess." Shishi pursed her lips. "Do-nee, is it all right now? Kitora and Suiko — they're re-sealed inside the relics?"

"I can no longer sense their living spirits — only their dormant forms." Doryoku agreed softly. "They are no longer drawing on the Shinzahou for power."

Shishi pursed her lips.

"Don't worry. I won't re-seal you like that." She promised. "I told you I wouldn't, and I meant it."

"Thank you, Shishi." A faint note of relief touched Doryoku's tones. "I… am not as brave as my sister mages, and I have lived too long around people. I do not like being alone."

"Even though she said she wasn't human, I think she did care about Hyoushin some." Hikari mused, walking across the chamber to where the three other Shinzahou stood. "And I guess I meant what I said to her, too. I won't let her or Kutou down. I don't think I'm afraid of this any more… I just… she said Suzaku would guide me. Doryoku-sama, will you help me, too? You must know something about this too — right?"

"Yes and no." Doryoku agreed. "But the thrust of it must come from you, Hikari. Your heart, your soul — your will to help the people here. This is the thing that matters most… your resolve to save Kutou. If you are truly decided to do that, then everything will come to you as it should. It's your strength that will raise this God — noone else can help."

"Right." Hikari pursed her lips, glancing at the glittering treasures as she positioned herself neatly in the middle of the triangle they

formed. “If that’s the case, then I guess it really is down to me to see how much I’ve learnt since I’ve been here, isn’t it?”

“Are you sure…?” Shishi asked softly, and Hikari nodded.

“Yes.” She agreed. “But promise you’ll stay here with me, Shishi. Whatever happens — don’t leave me. All right?”

“That’s easy to promise.” Shishi agreed. “I’m not plannin’ on goin’ anywhere, don’t worry. We’re a team, ain’t we? I’m not gonna run out on you. Even if I can’t help you raise Seiryuu — I can be here cheerin’ you on.”

“Then I guess that’s all I need.” A faint smile touched Hikari’s lips and she took a deep breath into her lungs, closing her eyes as she steadied herself. As she did so, brief glimpses of the people she had come to care about flashed across her senses, and in her heart she felt her resolve tighten and grow.

“I *can* do this.” She told herself firmly. “For Kutou — for Aoi and Maichu and Hyoushin and all the people here who’ve already suffered. For Kounan — Meikyo and Eiju, Chichiri and Aidou-san, Tasuki and Anzu-san and all the people on the mountain. For Shishi and Jin — for Jin who died to make sure I got to this point. For Sairou — for Myoume and her family, and the things she’s suffered because of Byakko’s calling. And for the Meihi in the North — the people in Hokkan who believe so strongly in peace. For all of them, I’m ready. I *can* do this. Suzaku, if you’re there, tell me what to do. Suiko said you would — that I can draw on your strength. And this time… this time I feel it, resonating within me. So I’m here, and so are the other Shinzahou. It’s time. Guide me, Suzaku… let me raise Seiryuu and save Kutou!”

“So, it was a bluff after all.”

Kikei glanced from Aoiketsu to the crouched shadow of the assassin, a faintly amused smile touching his lips as he folded his arms across his chest. “Well, Miramu — it seems you’ve gotten the better of these fools from the South after all. It was careless to lose your dagger so easily — or did you just hope that by letting them so close to their target, you’d be able to pick them off more easily, one by one?”

“Miramu, please! Don’t do this!” Myoume begged, darting across the chamber as she stood between her brother’s direct line of aim and the still form of the Meihi who still lay unresponsive on the cold stone floor, Aoiketsu huddled beside him. “You’ve done enough — please, for Byakko’s sake let it stop here!”

"*Byakko's* sake?" Miramu repeated, staring at his sister in incredulation. "Do you think that I'd ever do anything if it was for Byakko's sake, Myoume? Why would I want anything to do with that rabid, fur-spitting excuse for a deity? I told you ten years ago and I'll tell you again now — I have no use for the plans of an overgrown housecat. You won't appeal to me that way. My mind is made up and you cannot change it. No matter what."

His eyes narrowed, his expression hardening as he ran his finger along the edge of his bow.

"My mind is made up." He repeated. "There's no way back for me… what's done is done, and it can't be changed. And thanks to you and your visions… nor can what's to come. Can it, Toroki? You told me yourself that one day you and I would face each other and only one of us would live. I haven't forgotten that — have you?"

"No." Myoume faced him bravely, although her heart clenched in her chest as she gazed up at him. "But that's between you and me. It doesn't involve anyone else here. Lower your bow, Miramu. We'll settle our business between the two of us. It doesn't need to involve Kintsusei-sama or Hyoushin or anyone else. Enough people have already been hurt… and have already died. Please… let it end here and now."

Miramu's expression became unreadable, and Myoume saw his eyes flicker briefly in Aoiketsu's direction. Aoiketsu seemed to sense the gesture, for he glanced up, and Myoume was startled by the expression in the boy's gaze.

"Aoi…" She murmured. "Don't tell me… last night… it was…"

She faltered, biting her lip, as Kikei offered the assassin a smile.

"As it happens, Miramu, your timing is good." He said evenly. "This shrine is too crowded — and as a Priest of Seiryuu, it's unseemly for me to blood my hands too much. After all, I must yet find out where they have concealed Seiryuu no Miko — if her guardians are here, she must be somewhere nearby, and it is imperative now that we find her. Do not hesitate any longer. Arm your bow and deal with them… there is too much to do and they are in our way."

"Kikei!" Kintsusei's eyes widened and he shook his head. "No! This is *Seiryuu's* shrine! Kikei, if you have business with me, then speak it — I will listen as your Emperor and I will try to answer whatever grievance it is you have. But I won't have more people killed! Toroki is right — enough! This country has suffered already — *enough*!"

Impatience flickered in Kikei's eyes, and he shook his head.

"As you were before, trusting and gullible, you might have still been useful to me." He said regretfully. "But if you think to placate me with such empty promises, I will have to remove you as well. Miramu, you understand my meaning, don't you? Arm your bow. You will be well paid, after all, for ridding me of such irritating enemies."

"You bastard, if you dare fire that thing at Kintsusei-sama…" Maichu began, but Miramu sat back, letting out a hollow, humourless laugh as he neatly notched his arrow against the string of his bow.

"You are not a match for me, Shi Maichu." He said softly. "Don't antagonise me. I am not interested in killing insects when I could be slaying deer."

"What the hell does *that* mean?" Aoiketsu demanded, a question in his eyes, and at that look, Miramu's eyes softened.

"I haven't forgotten." He said simply, lowering the bow against the wooden beam. "I'm sorry, Kikei. It's not in my brief to kill an Emperor. I'm not that showy an assassin — that kind of notoriety would be bad for my career."

"With the amount I'll pay you, you won't need to worry about a career." Kikei snapped. "That's an order, Miramu — or are you weak, after all? You failed to kill Hyoushin — and now, it seems, you're going to fail me again?"

"Hyoushin was unexpected." Miramu admitted. "The Meihi are an unpredictable, enigmatic race, after all. But you misunderstand me, Lord Priest. I hesitate because I want clarification. Your plan — your desire to snare the Miko and use her power — I want you to confirm to me here once more exactly what will happen if you succeed. If I obey you, I will incur the wrath of Celestial Warriors… are you quite sure you can take that matter in hand?"

"With the greatest of ease." Kikei snorted. "With the power of the Miko, I will snuff them all out like candle flames. Each of them."

He gestured in Myoume's direction, and despite herself, the prophet bristled at the dismissiveness of the action.

"Even *that* one, who threatens your life. As I told you before, Miramu, you should not underestimate me. There will be no Seishi to contest you — not when this is done."

Miramu's eyes darkened thoughtfully, and he slowly nodded his head.

“As I thought.” He said quietly. “But you see, there’s a flaw in your reasoning, Kikei-sama. One that I was hoping I wouldn’t have to bring to the betting table — but you’ve made it unavoidable.”

He reached up to his throat, hesitating for a moment, then loosing the leather thongs that held his thick, red-marked collar in place. Carefully he removed it, running his finger briefly over the character for shadow, then tossing it to the floor at the Priest’s feet.

“Often have I referred to this — Nishi no Kage, as you called me, Kintsusei-sama.” He murmured. “But even *you* did not realise the truth of what it concealed.”

He ran his fingers across his skin, and as he did so, Kintsusei let out a gasp, his hand flying to his mouth. At first faint but becoming more vivid with each passing second, something white had began to glitter at the assassin’s throat, and as it became clearer, the Emperor seemed to realise exactly what it was.

“A stellar mark!” He whispered. “A… sign of… *Byakko*?”

“You are indeed an educated man, Heika.” Miramu agreed softly. “I’ve fought to hide it — I’ve run away from it for ten years. But this is my true self — the one which I have not revealed to you. This is the mark of Amefuri. I am Byakko’s lackey after all — and today, for the first time, I intend to use that fact.”

“Miramu?” Myoume stared at her brother uncertainly, and for the briefest of instants she had the impression of great sadness welling up inside of the young man’s soul. Then it was gone, as his eyes once more hardened, turning his attention to those gathered below.

“If you erase the Celestial Warriors, Kikei, I won’t be here to claim payment from you.” He added quietly. “Nor will, it seems, anyone else.”

“I don’t believe it.” Kikei gazed at him in disbelief. “You’re… you can’t be! Of all people… you…”

“I’m sorry to have deceived you.” Miramu said lightly, in a tone that suggested he was far from sorry at all. “And I’m sorrier still that our partnership has to fall to pieces in this way. But you see, even though I don’t care all that much about my own life, your plan is at odds with me in one way and one way only. If you erase the Seishi of this world, you’ll snuff every Celestial star from existence. Amefuri can die. I don’t care about him. But there is one star that must remain in the sky over Sairou. I won’t let you hurt Toroki, Kikei. I won’t let you hurt my sister.”

“On… iichan?” Myoume’s eyes almost fell out of her head at this, and Miramu turned, offering her a faint, regretful smile.

“This is all I can do, after all.” He said softly. “Kikei can do as he likes to me, to this world, to the Emperor — to anyone. I don’t care about any of it. But I won’t let him hurt you, imouto-chan. I promised myself that a long time ago and it’s the one thing I won’t turn away from.”

“Your *sister*?” Kikei looked incredulous. “You mean… that witch…”

“Is my half sister. Geiyo Myoume.” Miramu nodded his head. “You should have done your research a little better, Lord Priest… such an oversight is unforgivable. Even Hyoushin managed to reason that out without help from anyone else — yet you remained in the dark? Disappointing, isn’t it, to be so narrow in your understanding of the stellar souls? But then, I suppose, you never did have much interest in the four Gods, did you?”

“Seiryuu is the God I serve. Not your tiger.” Kikei’s expression darkened. “Amefuri or not, I won’t allow insubordination. You have had my protection for long enough — without it, do you think you can escape justice for all the crimes you have committed?”

“Probably not.” Miramu said carelessly. “Which means that my coming here has only one purpose. I can’t obey your orders, Kikei, if those orders involve harming Myoume. So instead I’ll obey someone else’s orders. How about *Nakago*’s orders — does that seem more appropriate?”

He sent Aoiketsu a teasing glance.

“Or at least, his representative.” He amended. “Well? What about it, Aoi-kun? What would you have me do, in order to keep our pact and protect those we both wish to keep alive?”

Aoiketsu hesitated for a moment, even as Maichu sent him an incredulous look. Then his eyes narrowed.

“What you told me last night you intended to do.” He said quietly, a flicker of darkness in his blue eyes. “If you don’t, Maichu or I will — but we had an arrangement and I’ll keep it, too. Act as you promised, Miramu. End this. Now.”

“Aye aye, Shougun-sama.” Miramu winked, although there was a bitter kind of humour in his gesture, and again Myoume felt a flicker of her brother’s pain stirring deep within his heart. With a deft sweep of his arm, he flicked his bow to face the other direction, pointing it directly towards the startled, discomfited priest.

“All the magic you can muster is nothing against one of Byakko’s people.” He said conversationally. “I’m sorry, Kikei. It didn’t work out, this time. Perhaps in the next life-time — if you have one to come.”

Before anyone could react, he had released his bolt, and, frozen to the spot, Myoume and her companions could only stare as the arrow hissed through the air, piercing the Priest through the throat and sending him stumbling backwards. He clutched at the barb, blood dribbling from his lips as he coughed and choked on this sudden brutal invasion of his airway, and Miramu sat back, resting his bow against the wood once more.

“*This* poison acts more quickly than the gendoku-ja venom I used on Hyoushin.” He said gravely. “I did not want to make a mistake this time. You shouldn’t fight it, Kikei. In a few seconds, you’ll no longer care about anything at all.”

Kikei glared up at him, gasping for air as he sent a look of pure anger and hatred in the assassin’s direction. Then his black eyes glazed over, rolling back into his head as he fell to the floor, a slick pool of blood beginning to spread out around him on the shrine floor. For a moment or two, the corpse twitched as the poison ran its course through the man’s elderly, substantial frame. Then, almost as soon as it had begun, it was over, and Kikei moved no more.

“Shi-i-i-it.” Maichu murmured, his face pale as he turned to stare at Miramu uncertainly. “Aoi, did you really make a deal with the devil last night?”

“And why didn’t you tell me that you had?” Myoume demanded. “Aoi-kun…”

“It was too dangerous.” Aoiketsu said softly. “Especially… if he’d betrayed us, I would’ve had to have acted. I didn’t want anyone else to trust him — in case he couldn’t be trusted.”

“Cold words, Aoi-kun — if sensible ones.” Miramu reflected. “Apologies for the mess, Kintsusei-heika — but I’m sure that he’ll make a nice plump head to display on the wall of your palace, once you’ve cleaned him up a bit. And if ever a man deserved to be there, Kikei did — I can confirm that he was the one who sent me to kill Hyoushin — and he was the one who stole your seal and forged the letter claiming the Meihi’s dismissal. He orchestrated all of it — in the end, he’s no loss to your court.”

“Kikei.” Kintsusei stumbled forward, bending beside the cooling body as he reached down to touch the man’s shoulder tentatively. “But after so long… I don’t understand…”

“Kikei was a Hin who wanted political power but couldn’t get it.” Miramu leapt neatly down from his perch. “Your laws in this land are screwed up — this is the end result. All that bitterness…”

He shook his head ruefully.

“Of all people, it makes sense to me why he did what he did. And if he hadn’t threatened Myoume, I would easily have followed him to the end.”

“But I don’t… why would you…” Myoume murmured, and Miramu turned, glancing at her as his gaze softened. He bowed his head towards her, then, with one sweeping gesture he loosened his quiver from his shoulder, dropping it and then his bow to the ground with a clatter.

“Well?” He said softly, raising his indigo eyes to meet his sister’s identical ones. “Here I am, Myoume. It’s time.”

“Time…?” Myoume stared, and a wry, humourless smile touched Miramu’s lips.

“Have you truly forgotten what you told me ten years ago?” He asked softly. Myoume’s face whitened, and slowly she shook her head. Miramu held out his hands.

“Well, then.” He said evenly. “Today is that day, isn’t it? I can see it in your eyes — you know it as well as I do. The final time we will meet like this. I’ve dropped my arms, little sister. Do what you must to make your vision come true.”

“Oniichan…” Myoume’s eyes glittered with tears and she shook her head. “Don’t be stupid! I’m not going to kill you!”

“You were the one who told me that only one of us would walk away from this confrontation.” Miramu said in low tones. “Don’t you know that I’ve avoided contact with you for so long for that very reason? You can see when things happen, and plot their course. You know better than me that time has run out for one of us. But I told you ten years ago that I would never take your life. No matter what else I did, or who else I slew — I would never, ever hurt you. That’s the only reason I turned on Kikei — the only reason I came here today and bartered with Seiryuu’s boy soldier to bring him down. I’ve given myself up to you… considering what I’ve done, you know my life is forfeit more than yours is.”

“Miramu…” Myoume swallowed hard, and her companion grabbed her roughly by the wrist, pulling off her glove and forcing her fingers against his skin. As he did so, a rush of images flooded the prophet’s

mind and she shook her head, struggling to pull her grasp away. He held her firm, however, fixing her with an intense, resolute stare.

“Understand what I am asking you to do.” He whispered. “Please, little sister. I don’t want to hurt you — I would never deliberately hurt you. And the longer you hesitate, the greater the risk that something I do will wind up causing you harm. So long as I live, your life is in danger. And you have something to live for… don’t you? Or have you given up on finding your man of peace…?”

At this Myoume’s eyes widened, and she stared up at him in dismay, tears coursing her cheeks. Slowly she shook her head, finally pulling herself free.

“No.” She admitted. “But Oniichan… don’t *you* understand, either? I can’t make you see my thoughts… or my feelings… I wish I could. I wish I knew how to do that, when you’ve always locked me out of your mind!”

She bit her lip, then darted forwards, flinging her arms around him as she buried her head in his shoulder, shaking with the force of her tears.

“No matter what you’ve done, I still love you.” She whispered, her voice catching in her throat and dimly she was aware of him stroking her hair as if attempting to calm her sobs. “No matter what you say, or whether… whether that’s how you feel. I *can’t* do it, Oniichan. I can’t kill you. I love you too much… Just as you can’t kill me, I… I can’t kill you.”

“My life is forfeit to the crown of Kutou and the crown of Kounan both.” Miramu said evenly. “And I no longer have that sly Priest to cover my tracks and protect me from their justice. I have committed crimes in every territory, and today I’ve done so in a place of prayer, in front of Imperial witnesses.”

“But Kikei was a traitor — you saved the Emperor’s life!”

“But before that, I attempted to slay his bodyguard and closest friend, too.” Miramu’s expression became one of irony as his gaze flitted to Hyoushin’s unconscious form, still tended as it was by Aoiketsu. “I cannot guarantee his life, little sister… or return the life of the friend I stole from you. But I can atone for them with *my* death, at the very least.”

“But Miramu…”

There is no way back for me — we both know it. Myoume…”

“I… I know.” Myoume clung to him, shaking her head. “But even so… even so… I… can’t!”

Miramu sighed, and Myoume was aware of the pounding of his heart against his ribs as she held on to him.

“Then there’s only one other thing to do.” He reflected sadly. “Little sister, forgive me.”

Myoume tensed, bracing herself as she waited for her brother to act, but instead of feeling the prick of a hidden blade against her skin, she was aware of Miramu’s sudden intake of breath, and then the sound of something dropping to the floor. Startled, she glanced up at him, and he gazed down at her, a faint smile touching his lips.

“I thought you might feel that way… or I suppose a part of me secretly *hoped* you would.” He murmured. “But I meant what I said, little sister. I love you too much to let you continue to live under the shadow of your own prophesy. If one of us is to die, let it be me.”

“Miramu…?” With a jolt, Myoume registered the clouding in his eyes, and the sudden increase in his heart-rate and fright flooded her expression as she held him at arm’s length, noticing for the first time the reddish tint of blood across her brother’s arm. She gazed at the tiny wound in horror for a moment, then down at the floor where whatever Miramu had dropped still lay discarded. A distinctively styled metal arrow-tip lay on the stone slabs, identical in design to the one which had driven the poison deep into Hyoushin’s body and she cursed, grabbing her brother’s arms more tightly as she gave him a little shake.

“What did you do?” She whispered. “Miramu… *what did you do*?!”

“The only thing that I could.” Miramu’s voice had already become fainter, and as his legs buckled beneath him, Myoume sank to the ground, fresh tears flowing down her cheeks as she supported her brother in her arms. “Don’t cry so much, Myoume… you’ve seen how I feel. You know that I’m tired… I’m fed up with living this life. I was never… able to be… Amefuri. I was never as strong as you were… I couldn’t embrace Byakko’s calling and I’ve paid the price. That’s all. But if I can let *you* live… if I can do that… at least I’ll have done one thing… worth-while.”

His brow creased as a faint shudder ran through his body, and Myoume gripped him more tightly to her, shaking her head.

“Oniichan…” She murmured. “I don’t want you to die… I don’t care what you’ve done — don’t you realise that your death would hurt

me too?"

"Yes." Miramu admitted, reaching up a shaking finger to brush the tears from her lashes. "But you… will understand… when the pain fades. I am not scared of my death, I never have been. I've brought darkness to many people, but I've never been able to find it for myself. I've often envied the people I've killed for the oblivion I've given them, but I knew that, because of your vision, I was still compelled to live through that pain and keep going. Keep existing, until this day came to pass. There's been only one thing I was scared of — being the cause of *your* death. And I'd made up my mind that, when this day did come, it wouldn't be you who Byakko's judgement would fall on. I want you to have your life, and meet your man of peace, my sister. I want you to live the life you've earned. For that I'll give mine… and hope Byakko forgives me for… for… not… protecting… either of his treasures. His Shi… n… za… hou… and… y… you."

He closed his eyes, pain crossing his expression as his skin became greyish and Myoume bit her lip.

"I love you so much." She whispered. "And I always hoped one day I'd have you back, Oniichan. That one day you'd fight your demons and win."

"I'm sorry to have failed so badly." Miramu opened his eyes at this, offering her a rueful smile. "I don't seem to be very good at this brother thing."

"Miramu." Myoume scolded. "Don't joke! Please, tell me what the poison is. Tell me… let me… let me stop this! Hyoushin's fought his for three, no, four days and he's not dead. There must be…"

"Myoume." Miramu's finger shifted to her lips, and he shook his head. "It's too late. I came here prepared… I came to kill Kikei and then myself, if you wouldn't do it f… for me. This is how it is meant to be. Your own sight predicted it — that only one of us will walk away from this. I will have… my peace, at last. And you… you… your life. Imouto-chan… what else should a brother do, than give his life for his little sister?"

Myoume bent her head to kiss her brother on the forehead, stroking his wisps of dark hair out of his eyes as another shudder ran through him, and he let out a faint murmur as the poison took hold of his body more strongly.

"I won't ever forget." She whispered. "Toroki and Amefuri were born for a reason, Miramu… a reason beyond Byakko's task. I do believe that. And even if you've hurt a lot of people, in the end, I was

glad… to have my brother again. Even for just a second… that you would defend me…"

She faltered, swallowing hard as her emotions overwhelmed her, and Miramu nodded his head slightly, a look of faint contentment flickering in his normally clouded indigo eyes.

"So long as you remember, I'll stay with you." He spoke softly, almost too quietly for her to hear. "I love you, Myoume. Live your life well, for the both of us. I know you will… I know you'll make your final vision come true. He's waiting for you still, you know… your… man… of… peace."

With that his eyelids fluttered closed for the last time and as he became limp against her body, Myoume was aware of the faltering and then the silence of Miramu's heart. She closed her eyes, tears running down her cheeks and onto her brother's still form as her emotions overwhelmed her.

"Goodbye, Oniichan." She murmured, slipping her hand into his and squeezing his lifeless fingers tightly between her own. "I won't forget. I'll never forget… what you did for me. Sleep safely… one day, Toroki and Amefuri will meet again, my brother… and I know you'll be waiting for me… when that time comes."

"Myoume?"

A soft voice from behind her made her turn, meeting Aoiketsu's concerned expression, and as he held out his hands to her, she allowed him to lift her gently to her feet.

"He took his own life, so he wouldn't take mine." She choked out. "Aoi, I really did lose my brother this time… just when I finally got him back again!"

Aoiketsu sighed, hugging her tightly.

"I'm sorry." He whispered. "I know you wanted to reach him. I didn't know that he'd intended that — only that he would kill Kikei, and that he didn't want harm to come to you. When he said that, I thought… I knew he was sincere. And so I trusted him. He did say that he didn't expect to live till dawn — but I thought he was simply misled — that he believed he could make you kill him. I didn't know he'd planned… to do this. If I had, I would have tried to prevent it."

"He wanted to die." Myoume cast a glance back at the still body lying on the ground, aware for the first time of the look of quiet contentment on her brother's face. "There was so much pain inside of him and he couldn't conquer it. In the end… he couldn't see any other

thing to do… I have to understand, Aoi, and I have to let… let him go, even though it hurts. But that he did it… for me…"

She swallowed again.

"It makes it hard, but at least I know he still loved me." She said quietly. "As much as I did him."

Before Aoiketsu could respond, there was a tremendous rumble, as the building shook violently from side to side, and as a crack appeared in the furthest wall, Maichu's eyes opened wide with disbelief.

"Is that…" He whispered, and Myoume swallowed her tears, turning to gaze in the direction of the dust-covered, crumbling rear wall. Slowly she nodded her head.

"Hikari." She murmured. "Which means… it's time… Seiryuu…"

"Seiryuu?" Kintsusei echoed, and Aoiketsu nodded.

"Seiryuu no Miko was with us all along." He admitted.

The Emperor's eyes widened.

"With you?" He repeated. "The girl… is here?"

"Right now, if everything's going according to plan, she's in the vault below drawing on the Shinzahou to summon Seiryuu." Myoume agreed softly. "That was the plan. We came here to keep Kikei occupied — to defeat him, if we at all could."

"And protect you, Heika." Maichu said grimly. "From that fat, lying bastard who's been messing with Kutou for far too long."

"Seiryuu no Miko." Kintsusei whispered. "At last… for Kutou…"

He turned, and Myoume realised that the cracks in the shrine wall were spreading.

"It's not going to be safe here much longer." She said quietly. "We should move back and hope for the best. If Hikari's calling on the divine, this whole shrine might come tumbling down — we're better staying back until we know precisely what's going on."

"What about Hyoushin-sama?" Aoiketsu demanded. "He's still alive — he's breathing, but I can't raise him. Kikei sent him flying — he's knocked clean out."

"It's too late to do anything either way." Maichu shook his head as another tremor rocked the shrine. "Whatever's happenin', I think it's about to happen now."

“No kidding.” Aoiketsu acknowledged. “I guess… we just have to believe in Hikari and hope for the best. After all… if she’s managed… somehow… I have faith in her.”

A look of resolution crossed his face, and he nodded.

“It’ll be all right now, I know it will.” He said firmly. “Somehow Hikari will raise him. Somehow she’ll save Kutou. I *know* she will!”

Chapter 26

Chapter Twenty Five

Almost as soon as Hikari's words had left her lips, she felt something surge and flow up from within her, and she gasped, electricity prickling across her senses as for the first time she saw the sweeping figure of a divine being in her mind's eye. At first glance he seemed human, but as his likeness became more vivid, Hikari registered the spreading red and gold of feathered wings, and instinctively she knew that this was Suzaku — the being whose magic her mother had sealed within her before she was born.

"Suzaku no Shinzahou."

He spoke softly, but the words rang out across her senses as if he had shouted. "You have asked for my help, and I will give it."

He reached out ghostly hands, seeming to take hers in his strange grip, and Hikari felt once more comforted by the warmth of his touch.

"Believe in yourself, Seiryuu no Miko." He murmured. "Focus on the feelings deep within your heart, and you will understand what you should do."

"In my heart…" Hikari echoed softly, and as she did so, the figure that danced before her hazed and disappeared in a shower of red light. She took a deep breath, steadying herself, and as she did so, she was sure she could hear the echoing of an ancient voice trickling across her psyche. Instinctively she strained to hear the words, and as they became clearer, she suddenly understood what they meant.

"To summon a God." She whispered. "I understand, Suzaku. I know what I have to do. Lend me your strength, please… as Suzaku no Shinzahou, I need it!"

She spread her hands, her body bathed in a strange glow as she opened her eyes, meeting Shishi's awed ones across the chamber. A quick glance at the surrounding Shinzahou told her that they too were reacting to her sudden aura, reaching out their magic to brush with hers as for a moment she felt miles above the musty shrine chamber. Then she gathered her wits, her expression becoming one of resolution. Softly she began to speak, allowing the words of ancient years past to wash over her senses and leave her lips.

“Shiguu no ten to shihou no chi
Futakihouto shin to zen o motte
Touhou-shuugo no” Seiryuu “onmi ni tsugetamawaku
Ware ima kono kotoba o nasu.”

“Hiki…”

Shishi murmured, her eyes growing big in surprise as Hikari felt something tremendous and strong pound through her heart. “Shit… who taught you the spell? Did *Chichiri* teach you that, before we left Kounan?”

Hikari opened her mouth to respond, but instead she found her vocal chords were no longer her own, and more ancient words spilled from her lips.

“Shichishuku ten yori chi ni genzu wa
Onmi o katsugousu shujou no tame no yue
Koko ni oite moromoro no aku o messhi
Sono shinriki de warera o kugosubeshi”

A shudder ran up her spine, as all around her the glimmering Shinzahou began to tremble with the force of the magic running through her veins. No longer able to control it, Hikari gave herself up to the impulse, flinging her arms further out as she allowed the hypnotic, resonating words to engulf her heart.

“Tada negawaku wa kore o kike
ten yori wa ga moto e
oritachi tamae.”

She took a deep breath, and from somewhere in the depths of her psyche she thought she saw the briefest glimpse of a dragon’s tail disappearing into the darkness. Her eyes narrowed with resolution, and she spread her fingers, willing the beast to reach out to her as she was reaching out to him.

“*Seiryuu*!”

She exclaimed, and as if in answer to his name, the entire chamber became suddenly bathed in blue light, so bright that in the far corner Shishi swore, shielding her eyes from its glare. All around them the walls of the divine chamber shook and trembled, cracks appearing in the ceiling as the light grew brighter and brighter, and from deep within the haze Hikari saw the figure of a man robed in blue, his appearance completely in contrast to that of the warm, reassuring Suzaku.

And yet, in her heart, Hikari knew that this was the God she had

summoned.

"You are the Miko who summons me here?" He asked softly, coming towards her through the haze, and reaching out a hand to touch hers. Mutely Hikari nodded, feeling that at any moment her heart might explode with the force of the magic swirling within her. The already abused ceiling above their heads buckled and gave way as flares of azure light broke through to the surface, but Hikari was oblivious to all but this stranger in front of her, with his strong, decisive aura almost choking her where she stood.

"I will bond with you." Seiryuu spoke slowly, and Hikari was half-sure he had already penetrated her soul. "And enter your body, fusing us as one. In return, I will grant you the use of my power three times, in the form of wishes. Is this acceptable, Seiryuu no Miko?"

"Yes." Hikari found her voice, but even as she spoke she felt like it was a stranger speaking. "Yes. I understand."

"Then allow me to connect with you, Seiryuu no Miko." Seiryuu brushed his finger against her skin, and Hikari gasped, feeling a sharp jolt of electricity run down her spine. "And let me use your strength by which to enter this world."

Hikari swallowed hard, as flickers of her earlier fear began to gnaw at the edges of her senses. Then she gathered her wits, forcing them back as she faced the apparition determinedly.

"I understand." She repeated. "I accept."

Seiryuu eyed her for a moment. Then he spread his hands, dispersing his form into a swirl of azure energy. As the light pierced through Hikari's chest, she felt a burning, searing pain shoot through her body and she stumbled to her knees, gasping for breath as the strength of Seiryuu's magic overwhelmed her. For a moment she felt like she was drowning, swimming against the tide of a powerful ocean as wave upon wave of Eastern magic washed over her head.

"*Hiki*!" From somewhere in the distant background, she was faintly aware of Shishi's concerned yell, and somehow the sound of her friend's voice brought her back to her senses. Somehow she struggled to regain control, taking several rasping breaths into her lungs as she forced her body to calm down.

"*We are now one, Seiryuu no Miko*." Seiryuu's voice echoed through her thoughts. "*You who possess the power of Suzaku are now chosen of Seiryuu. As promised, I grant you the use of my power three times. To make your wish, you must first cast the spell 'Kaijin', and I will grant it. Be*

careful, Miko. Understand that the power I give you will slowly absorb you into myself. Do not use it unwisely… as those who have gone before have done."

"Gone before…" Hikari murmured faintly, then her eyes widened as she realised what Seiryuu meant.

"Hongou Yui." She breathed. "You remember her. You really… you did choose me to come and put right what she couldn't do."

"*Do as your heart instructs you, Suzaku no Shinzahou.*" This time the voice that rippled through her thoughts was the gentler one belonging to Suzaku, and Hikari realised that the two Gods had forged together inside of her, completing the pact they had made so many generations before.

She set her teeth, knowing what she had to do.

"*Kaijin*!" She exclaimed, flinging her hand up towards the remains of the chamber ceiling, and as she did, she was aware of a tremendous shake of the earth as the last of the cement-work gave way, blasting the walls of the chamber aside and sending great, searing cracks through the walls of the shrine above as the divide between the two chambers crumbled away into nothing. Dimly she was aware of something huge blocking the path of the sun as it swung and danced above her, and somehow she knew that this was the true form of Seiryuu, the God of the East who had asked her to help his people.

This thought hardened her resolve yet more, and she took a deep breath.

"Raise all the beast Gods from their sleep!" She cried. "Byakko, Genbu, Suzaku and Seiryuu, unite in the sky over the East! I call on you all, wake to my command!"

The earth shook again, sending more bricks and plaster tumbling to the ground as the once proud shrine of Seiryuu began to collapse, and faintly Hikari was aware of a glittering silver barrier as Doryoku's blessed magic shot up around them, shielding them from the falling rubble. Dimly she realised that Shishi's ally was not just defending her host, but also others who had been gathered in the shrine itself, but there was no longer any division between shrine and vault as with another tremendous shake of the earth, three shadows began to stretch across the land. From the West, the glittering snow-white coat of Byakko, the Tiger shone in the Eastern sun as he let out a yowl, pawing at the air and swishing his tail as he bared his glittering white fangs. From the North, the roaring, thumping sound of Genbu's snake-turtle form rumbled across the landscape, each heavy step shaking the

ground yet more as he threw back his head, emitting a tremendous shriek that split through to Hikari's very soul. And from the South, the swooping, flame-tipped form of the Phoenix, eyes glittering with fire as he hovered like a hawk overhead, beating his wings in the summer breeze.

A sudden sense of tiredness flooded through Hikari's body, and she clasped a hand to her chest, feeling as though something inside of her was chewing away on her soul. Remembering Chichiri's words about the Gods, she bit her lip, forcing herself to remain composed.

"I *have* to do this." She muttered. "I'm not weak… I'm not going to let anyone down. I'm going to do this — no matter what happens to me, *I have to*!"

She closed her eyes, steadying herself for a moment. Then she spread her hands once more.

"*Kaijin*!" She cried, and the sky over her head split with sapphire lightning as Seiryuu acknowledged her call.

"Gods in the sky above Kutou, unite and protect your lands from war and destruction! Seiryuu, allow Kutou to finally have peace, and Byakko, Genbu, Suzaku — allow all the lands to live in peace together. Break down the divides and the suspicions and allow *everyone* to live in peace!"

As soon as the words had left her mouth, she felt the pain stab through her once more, more intrusive and oppressive than before, and tears glittered in her eyes as she fought to remain in control of her faculties. Seiryuu was rooting deeper and deeper into her body, she knew that, and yet even as she wondered whether the God would engulf her completely, she remembered what Chichiri and Myoume had said.

"Two Mikos succeeded. Two failed." She whispered, sweat beading her brow as she fought against the intoxicating effects of the Dragon's forceful magic. "But I'm Suzaku no Shinzahou. I'm Suzaku no Miko's daughter. I'm *not* going to fail. Mother trusted me with this power and it was for this purpose. I'm not going to be devoured by Seiryuu. No matter how much it hurts — I'm not going to give in."

She glanced up, aware that above her head the four Gods who had darted warily around one another a moment earlier had begun to draw together, glittering, flaring magic swirling and mixing into one burst of divine light as Seiryuu worked to grant her wish. She took a deep breath as the pain wracked through her a second time, hardening her resolve as she focused her attention on the spells being cast above

her head.

“Hyoushin-san has suffered in pain for the past few days, but he still came here to help me and help Kutou.” She told herself firmly. “If he can bear Miramu’s poisoning that long, I can bear this. I’m equal to it. I have to be. It’s only pain… right? So long as I’m breathing… so long as I’m thinking… I’m still able to fight.”

She brought her hands together, even as the flare of divine magic shot out across the four corners of the ShijinTenchishou, illuminating the landscape briefly before fading into nothing.

Hikari gathered her wits, focusing all of her remaining strength as she prepared to make her final wish.

“Kaijin.” She whispered, gazing up at the sky over her head as she locked gazes with the spectral dragon that arched over her head. “Seiryuu, please… somehow, someway… bring Jin back to Reikaku-zan. He died for my sake — he died because of me — and I… I don’t like that it’s that way. Please… won’t you give Jin back his life?”

There was a moment of stillness, then she felt Seiryuu’s aura flicker against her own as once more the spectral form of the man hovered in front of her. He reached out his hand to touch her cheek, and Hikari was aware of sadness in his gaze. Slowly he shook his head.

“This wish I cannot grant.” He murmured. “Your friend’s life is already lost. His soul has already travelled. I cannot bring him back to existance. It is not allowed.”

“Not…” Hikari’s eyes widened with dismay. “But… Seiryuu-sama… you… I… saving Kutou, all of those things — I wished for that, didn’t I? I used your power to save this land, just like you wanted me to. And you could do that — even summon and combine with your fellow Gods to grant my wishes. But you can’t… you can’t bring back one bandit to the mountain that he loved?”

Tears spilled down her cheeks, and Seiryuu reached up a finger to brush them away, shaking his head once more.

“The bandit known as Jin is in Suzaku’s care.” He said gently. “He will have new life — this is already promised him. He will not suffer, and his soul is safe. But I cannot bring back life to a body already decayed and dead. I am sorry, Seiryuu no Miko. This wish is one I cannot grant.”

Hikari closed her eyes, unable to stop the flow of tears, and she felt Seiryuu’s touch against her skin a second time.

“You have a good heart, Miko.” He murmured. “A strong heart. Suzaku promised me his Shinzahou would be a Miko Kutou could find faith in. He was right. I cannot grant your wish, but I will leave your body. You have done my bidding… I will not harm you further.”

“Not harm… me?” Hikari’s eyes snapped open, and Seiryuu nodded.

“This was also part of my pact with Suzaku.” He agreed. “That if my Miko came from his people, I would not hurt her. And so long as she was true and strong of heart, I promised him I would not. I will not consume your soul, Seiryuu no Miko, even though you are weak enough now for me to do so with ease. You have saved my land, and even in the end, your final wish was not for yourself, but for the soul of a friend. Such a person should be allowed to live and do further good in this world.”

He offered her a faint smile.

“Thank you, Seiryuu no Miko.” He whispered. “Your duty here is done.”

With that he disappeared from view, and as the blue haze around her slowly began to dissipate, Hikari was aware of the shadowy Gods above her head also beginning to fade away, drawing back towards their corners of the ShijinTenchishou as the sky above Kutou was restored to its normal sunny state. Unable to even stand, Hikari stared numbly around her, registering the devastation of the shrine and the resultant effect of the violent tremors only vaguely as she struggled to make sense of what had just happened. Voices bombarded her senses, as faintly she absorbed the fact that vault and shrine were no longer walls or depths apart but shaken to the same level by the God’s powerful magic, and it was not only Shishi but others who she called allies that now surrounded her. Many of them were calling her name, but she was unable to distinguish them one from another, her spirit and her wits so completely detached from her body that nothing she was hearing seemed to make any sense.

“Hiki?” As someone’s arm slipped around her body, Hikari was aware of Shishi’s voice murmuring her name, and something in the bandit’s concerned tones broke through her daze as she flung herself on her younger companion, burying her head in Shishi’s shoulder as she shook with sobs.

“Shit, Hiki, why all the tears?” Shishi demanded, but Hikari felt her friend’s arms tighten reassuringly around her body. “You called Seiryuu. Didn’t you? You made the wishes. You did it… you saved

Kutou. Why are you crying? You did it."

"Jin…" Hikari raised tearful eyes to the bandit's quizzical ones. "I tried… but Shishi… Seiryuu couldn't…"

She faltered, and Shishi's eyes became sombre. She nodded.

"I know. I heard." She admitted. "I guess… if that's how it is, that's just how it'll have to be. Thank you for trying, at least. It's not your fault it didn't work, Hiki… don't cry like that. Jin wouldn't want you to — you did what you came here to do, after all. You won."

"I'm… so tired…" Hikari murmured, as the world around her swung and twisted towards blackness, and Shishi hugged her tightly.

"You blew up the shrine, and the vault… they're one big mess of rubble now." She said categorically. "No wonder you're beat… makin' a mess like this."

She offered a faint smile.

"I guess if you want to fall asleep on me, it's okay." She added softly. "Since you did all that an' stuff. It was shit scary, seein' those Gods in the sky overhead an' knowin' it was you who was commandin' them. No kiddin' that you're Suzaku no Miko's heiress, actin' like that."

"It hurt…" Hikari murmured feebly. "But he said… he wouldn't devour me. He promised… Suzaku…"

That was all she managed, however, as her exhaustion overwhelmed her, and, safe in her friend's grasp, she closed her eyes, allowing the darkness to overtake her senses. There would be time enough later to think, but for now her body submitted to unconsciousness as the world around her faded to black.

"Miaka?"

As the coffee mug slipped through his wife's fingers, Taka was on his feet, hurrying towards her as he registered the strange, half-dazed expression that glittered in the other's eyes.

"Miaka, snap out of it… Miaka! What is it… *Miaka*!?"

"Hikari."

Miaka turned tearful hazel eyes on her husband, grasping his hands tightly in hers as she gazed up at him. "Can't you feel it? Taka-kun, Hikari is…"

Taka faltered, swallowing hard as he registered the faint sensation that resonated deep within him.

“Is it… Suzaku?” He whispered, and Miaka shrugged her shoulders, biting her lip.

“I don’t know.” She admitted. “I think… for a moment I thought I heard his voice. Like I have before… when he spread his wings and flew up before me. But I… I didn’t see him, this time. It was… Hikari. I felt her… for a moment I heard her speak, too. I heard her say… the words that summon a God to the ShijinTenchishou. And then… something warm flooded up inside of me.”

She let out a gasp, glancing down at the floor to where the splintered remains of her coffee cup were scattered in a pool of hot brown liquid.

“Oh, look what I’ve done! Taka, I’m sorry… I didn’t even think…”

“It’s all right.” Taka shook his head. “Like that matters, when Hikari might be…”

He hesitated, then,

“Do you think she’s all right? Miaka… is this what she… went there to do?”

“I… I think so.” Despite herself, Miaka’s voice shook slightly, and Taka sat down beside her, slipping his arm around her shoulders.

“It’s been a tough couple of days, not knowing.” He murmured. “Hasn’t it?”

Slowly Miaka nodded.

“I have faith in her.” She admitted. “I always have had faith in her — in both of my children, Taka. It’s just… I know what it’s like to summon a God. And… when I heard her speak…”

She sighed heavily, reaching up to rub her temples.

“You didn’t hear her?” She asked softly, and Taka shook his head.

“I’m not Tamahome like I was before.” He admitted regretfully. “Suzaku’s call isn’t as strong within me now as it could be, even considering it’s Hikari we’re talking about. I feel something — but I didn’t hear her speak. I guess that’s a bond between mother and daughter… it’s something I don’t share.”

“I think it’s something else.” Miaka got to her feet, pacing restlessly to the window as she gazed up at the clear blue sky. “Taka, I think it’s

a bond between Mikos… that Hikari and I share that in common. We both went to that world to raise a beast God and save a country… it's like time is repeating itself all over again."

"So in the end, Hikari-chan was Suzaku no Miko after all?" Taka murmured, and Miaka shook her head, turning back to face him.

"The name of the God she called wasn't Suzaku." She said slowly, and Taka's expression became confused.

"Not… Suzaku?" He echoed. "But… she's your daughter, and my daughter. She's Suzaku's Shinzahou. She's in Kounan, with Chichiri. Why the hell not?"

"I don't understand it completely either, but I'm certain just the same." Miaka said heavily. "Taka-kun, the God she called was Seiryuu. The God of Kutou — the Dragon of the East."

"*Seiryuu*?" Shock glittered in Taka's expression and he gripped his wife by the shoulders, forcing her to meet his gaze. "Are you serious? *Kutou's* God? But why? Kutou and Kounan were… in the past… the country where that bastard…"

He faltered, and slowly Miaka nodded her head.

"That's why, I suppose." She whispered. "Because of all of that, Hikari was needed. Yui never did manage to save Kutou, after all. Perhaps that's why Hikari went there after all. She went to save the East, not the South. She's not Suzaku's Miko after all… she's Seiryuu's."

"I don't believe it." Taka murmured. "Our daughter… is… *Seiryuu* no Miko?"

Miaka shrugged her shoulders.

"That's what I think." She agreed. "And maybe that's why you didn't feel it so strongly as I did. You're Suzaku's — you were born that way, and at heart I know you still are, Taka-kun. Even if you are Sukunami Taka, part of you will always be the Tamahome I fell in love with. You were re-crafted for this world by Suzaku — every part of you is still somehow a part of him. Me, on the other hand…"

She spread her hands.

"Like Hikari, I was born *here*." She added. "Like Hikari, I changed the fate of a country. Kutou must have been a sad, desperate place after Nakago was killed, you know. We never gave it a thought, but I suppose it must have been that way. And if it's our daughter who can change that — surely it's a good thing?"

“But Seiryuu almost devoured Yui.” Taka protested, and Miaka nodded, looking grave.

“I know.” She admitted. “But… somehow… I think Hikari is stronger. I think… somehow I believe she’ll be all right, Taka-kun. She’s our daughter, after all. Somehow she’ll do it — somehow she’ll pull through. And then, when she’s saved Kutou…”

“She’ll come home.” Relief flickered in Taka’s gaze as he registered his wife’s meaning. “And it’ll all be over, at last.”

“Yes.” Miaka agreed softly. “Which also means I should give Arina-chan a call — because the poor child’s probably as worried as we are, considering everything that’s been thrust on her these past few days.”

She spread her hands.

“After all, the waiting is almost over.” She added “And we should all be ready to welcome her, when she returns!”

Writer’s note: Summoning Seiryuu

Hikari’s summoning spell is the same as the spell Miaka used to summon Suzaku with one exception — instead of summoning from the south, I amended it so that she would summon from the East. I transcribed the spell from the Eikouden novel, so any transliteration errors are my Japanese transliterating idiocy. :) Sadly Yui’s incantation to raise Seiryuu didn’t appear in the anime or anywhere else, so I can’t be a hundred percent sure that Suzaku’s spell would work just as well for Seiryuu. But eh. It’s a story, right…? Artistic licence allowed..:D

I changed the wording Seiryuu used to bond with Hikari somewhat for originality’s sake, but the spell is authentic to the continuity.

The spell is copyright to Watase Yuu and Fushigi Yuugi and I’ve just borrowed it for authenticity’s sake. :)

Chapter 27

Chapter Twenty Six

So it was finally over.

Myoume hesitated beside the still form of her brother, pausing to touch his brow as she pushed her fingers together in prayer for his soul. Her heart still ached at the nature of his sacrifice, but as she gazed down at his peaceful, contented expression, she realised that in the end, it had been his only escape.

“To leave his demons behind, he became Amefuri.” She murmured. “To defend this world, and to protect me, he accepted his stellar mark and fought against evil. You killed so many, and hurt so many more, Oniichan. Yet, in the end, this whole world is still somehow in your debt. You were a Seishi at the end, when it counted most of all. My vision was true — so long as you refused your destiny, this world would be in peril. But you accepted it. And now, thanks to your arrow… Kikei is gone.”

She got slowly to her feet, taking a deep breath to steady herself as she did so.

“And I am still alive.” She realised. “A situation I didn’t expect or… or plan for. After the dust settles, in this place… I’m still here. I didn’t realise Miramu’s love for me was still as strong as that. For doubting you, my brother, I’m sorry. I’ll make amends — I’ll make sure Mother understands what you did for me… for everyone. She’ll be glad, when she knows that in the end, you did fight your demons. And… I guess… you won.”

“Toroki-sama.”

The Emperor’s voice startled her and she turned, meeting his sombre, troubled gaze with a confused one of her own.

“Heika… what…”

“I am sorry.” Kintsusei said softly. “For many things, but most of all…”

He paused, his gaze flitting over Miramu’s body, and Myoume sighed.

“It was my brother’s choice. You’ve no reason to apologise to me,

or for his death." She said evenly. "There are other things, perhaps, you need to regret — but Miramu and I… not that."

"Perhaps so." Kintsusei admitted. "But…"

He sighed, shaking his head.

"For your courage in coming here… for your commitment in helping my people, I must do something in return." He murmured.

Myoume bit her lip, drawing a slow breath into her lungs as she steadied her emotions.

"I understand that what Miramu has done means his body is also forfeit to Kutou's crown." She whispered. "That he has spilled blood in a holy place, attacked your close ally and plotted with one who sought to overthrow you. But Kintsusei-sama — please… my brother… if I can ask one thing of you, it's that he isn't… to suffer the fate of others like him. Your palace gate… I don't want him… there."

"The palace…" Kintsusei faltered, then understanding flickered in his dark eyes and he shook his head.

"In the end, I owe that rogue my life — at least to some degree." He said gravely. "If anyone other than Kikei himself is responsible for these events, I think perhaps the blame should lie with me for not seeing sooner how things were. For all his flaws, in the end, your brother was a brave man, and loyal to what he believed. You have my word, Toroki-sama. Amefuri's remains will not be so mutilated. I do not… I do not consider him a traitor to Kutou's peace."

"Even though he fired the arrow that wounded Hyoushin?"

"Even so." Kintsusei's expression became sombre. "Again, this could have been prevented if not for my naivety in judgement. Hyoushin's predicament is my fault alone."

He sighed, rubbing his temples.

"In fact, I hope I will be able to make some amends." He admitted. "I cannot reverse your family's loss, but please, allow me to at least make arrangements for your brother's burial. I feel… at least… I should do something towards that."

"Miramu should go home to Sairou, where his mother has waited for him for a long time." Myoume shook her head. "It's kind of you, Heika, but…"

"Then let me arrange for him to be cremated with Seiryuu's blessing, and allow me to organise transport for you to take his ashes

home to his family." Kintsusei amended. "Even though he was a man of Byakko, he died in Kutou and should be so blessed. And though my shrine here needs purifying and rebuilding, I'm sure there are many stellar priests among my country's subjects."

His eyes became clouded.

"For causing so much trouble for so many people, it is the least I can do — please do not refuse me."

Myoume hesitated, then she offered the Kutou Emperor a faint smile. Slowly she nodded.

"All right." She agreed. "That would be kind… it would help a lot, in fact, because Sairou is a long way away and I would like to be able to travel as far as Kounan with those I've become close to. I didn't expect to be alive after all of this — so the help would be appreciated."

"Then it's settled." Kintsusei looked relieved. "I'll make sure that everything is taken care of… you have my word on that."

"Myoume!"

Aoiketsu's voice cut through the conversation at that point, and the Seishi jerked around, meeting the soldier's frantic gaze with a quizzical, startled one of her own.

"Aoi-kun? What's the matter?" She demanded, gathering her wits hurriedly as she realised that something was badly amiss. "You look terrified — what's happened? What's wrong?"

"It's the Commander!" Aoiketsu grabbed hold of her arm, fright glittering in his seiran eyes. "He… he's stopped breathing! I can't stir him — I don't know what to do! Myoume… your parents are apothecaries, right? Someone must be able to do something… Myoume, he's going to die if we don't…"

"*Hyoushin?*!" At the sound of Aoiketsu's panicked exclamation, Kintsusei hurried down beside his fallen retainer, fumbling at his throat for a pulse as he did so, and Myoume saw genuine terror in the man's eyes. "But surely… Kikei only knocked him unconscious. Didn't he?"

"He was breathing up till a moment ago." Aoiketsu responded anxiously. "But then I saw how blue he looked, and I couldn't feel…"

"I can't find a pulse either." Kintsusei's tones were wracked with fear and with a jolt Myoume realised that to the Emperor the Meihi was not simply another Imperial retainer, but a true and dear friend

that had brooked the gap between a King and the isolation of his position for almost twenty years.

“Someone, fetch Aishi-sensei! *Immediately*! There’s no time to lose!”

“Yes, sire!” Maichu scrambled to his feet, casting an apprehensive look back at his Commander before disappearing through the rubble of the shrine towards the main corridors of the palace, where the drugged, stupefied guards were slowly beginning to recover from the effects of Miramu’s debilitatory potion. Myoume bit her lip, cold dread seeping through her as she registered the blueness of the Meihi’s lips. Aoiketsu had been right, she thought grimly to herself. Hyoushin was always pale, she knew that, but there this pallor was surreal as a ghost’s, and as she brushed her left hand against his skin, she thought she could feel it cooling.

“Heika…” She murmured, half imagining someone else was saying the words. “I don’t think… I can’t…”

“He *can’t* be dead!” Tears glittered in Aoiketsu’s gaze and he shook his head. “After all he’s been through — all *we’ve* been through — there must be something! He can’t give up that easily — dammit, I *won’t* let Kikei take someone else!”

Myoume glanced at her hands, inwardly making up her mind as she gently began to remove the black glove that hid her right index finger from view. At her movement, Aoiketsu’s eyes widened and a flicker of hope stirred in their depths.

“Myoume…” He murmured, then, “Can you… bring him… back?”

“If he’s dead, I can’t do anything.” Myoume said frankly, more abruptly than she intended as she fought to marshal her own unsteady emotions. “But if he’s still there somewhere… I can try. It’s the only thing… I can try.”

“Try what?” Kintsusei demanded. “Toroki-sama, is there some kind of magic… something you can do? If Hyoushin dies now, after all this… I’ll never forgive myself. Never!”

“One thing. Maybe.” Myoume took a deep breath, closing her eyes. “Please, don’t speak any more, Heika. I need… you to be silent. Just watch him for any sign… anything at all. Because I don’t know if this will work… and I need to focus all my thoughts on what I’m going to do.”

“Understood.” Like the soldier he had once been, Kintsusei bowed his head at her command. “Whatever you can do — just please, hurry!”

Myoume swallowed hard, gathering her wits as she readied herself for the task ahead. Then she flexed her fingers, pressing her stellar mark down firmly against the stricken man's skin as she reached out her thoughts and her senses to brush with his. Inwardly she braced herself, ready for the surge of emotions and memories that had hit her so hard the first time she had invaded his privacy, but to her dismay they never came.

Instead there was darkness, and silence all around her.

For a moment despair welled through her, as she wondered whether or not her intervention was too late. Then, somewhere in the depths of the black she caught a faint blur of something moving, and hope flared within her as she pushed all of her thoughts towards making contact with that impulse. It was faint and flickering, she realised, as she drew nearer — the finest, most fragile strand of light that divided the Meihi from the oblivion of death, and as she crouched beside it, she was aware of its weakening, translucent glow.

"You want to stop fighting, don't you." She murmured, and from somewhere far away from Hyoushin's psyche she was sure she could feel the hot wetness of tears beginning to flow once more down her already stained cheeks. "You've fought so hard — you've done so much, and suffered so many things. You want to give up, now. You've succeeded — everything here is all right. And you think… your job is done. Don't you?"

There was no response, only silence, but the slither of silvery light kept burning, and Myoume steeled her resolve, shuffling her spirit form closer to it as she spread her hands around it.

"I'm selfish and manipulative." She told him softly. "And I school people's destinies into what Byakko wants them to be. I didn't let you die against my brother, though I know it caused you to suffer pain when I forced you to stay alive. I stopped you from protecting your own soldiers from fighting one another, because I sought to preserve your life. All the time I've been here, making you carry on. That's the connection we have, isn't it, Hyoushin? The link you and I share and have shared for a long, long, time. I'm the catalyst that has kept you alive till now — in order to save Kutou, you couldn't die. Until we'd met, you couldn't die. Until the East was safe… you couldn't let go or find any kind of peace. Like my brother, in the end, you were bound by Toroki's prophesies. And now you've had enough… your body and your mind both want to let go. I can sense that, just from this flicker of life left."

She closed her eyes, slowly shaking her head.

“I’m still selfish, though.” She whispered, reaching out to touch the thread with a ghostly white finger. “I can’t let you go that easily. Even though you’ve had enough — I won’t let you slip away just yet. There are people here — Aoi, Kintsusei-sama… your sister in Hokkan — they need you. And me, too. I need you to live as well, Hyoushin. I’ve always needed you to. You’re my man of peace, after all… and I’ve not been able to explain that to you, yet. I have a lot of things I need to talk to you about… but I can’t do that unless you pull through.”

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, from the faint glitter of light came a brief flare of energy, and Myoume’s eyes widened as she reached out to brush it with her hands.

“You can hear me, can’t you?” She realised. “Calling to you. I’ve come to bring you back, Hyoushin. Back to where you should be. Because you said to me that when this was all over, you wanted to be able to live for yourself. And now it is over. Are you going to throw away that chance? Will you let Kikei win, in the end, by taking away from you your future?”

At this the light seemed to flare stronger, and Myoume bit her lip.

“It’s now or never.” She muttered. “The longer you’re not responsive, the harder it will be — I’m sorry that I’m doing this again, Hyoushin, but you’ve left me with no choice. I have to go inside deeper… and I have to pull you back. No matter how you feel about it — I’m not going to let you die. Toroki didn’t predict that, and I’m damn well going to make sure it doesn’t happen!”

To think was to act, and before she could dissuade herself she closed her eyes tightly, plunging her spiritual energy into the thread of light as she forced herself mercilessly deeper and deeper into the Meihi’s sleeping consciousness. As she did so, she felt fragments and strands of memory and thought that drifted aimlessly in the blackness, and, gritting her teeth in resolve, she reached out to grasp each one, bringing them together and binding them with her magic.

“You’ve run out of your own strength, maybe, but it’s all right. I’ll give you as much of mine as I need to, if it means you’re going to live.” She whispered. “It’s okay, isn’t it, to do that? You’ll forgive me, won’t you? Because I don’t want you to die, Hyoushin. *I don’t want you to die*!”

As if responding to her final, desperate thoughts, there was a sudden flare of light and energy around her, and with a gasp Myoume opened her eyes, finding herself face to face with the spectral form of her companion. He gazed at her in surprise, an odd light glittering in

his amethyst eyes and Myoume realised that she had been very nearly too late — that he had almost severed his soul from his body completely, and that if she was going to reverse it, time was running out. She darted forwards, grasping the apparition's hands in her own spectral ones, and Hyoushin stared at her, a faint flicker of recognition touching his gaze.

"The woman in white." He murmured, and Myoume nodded, tightening her grasp on his hands.

"I'll always be looking out for you, you know." She told him, no longer caring that tears were coursing down her cheeks. "Since I was just a child, I've seen you in my dreams and my visions, and I knew that one day we'd meet somehow. I didn't understand it then — maybe I don't even understand it now. But I do understand this — I don't want you to go away. Even though Kutou's safe — you deserve a chance to live for yourself too, don't you? Even though you're tired, and even though it's been hard and painful and your body wants to give up. Won't you trust me and let me share my strength with you a little? I want to help you back to where you should be — but I can't do it unless you agree."

"Back to… where…?" The spectre murmured, and Myoume was aware of disjointed specks of memory flickering all around her. She frowned, nodding her head.

"It's not time for you to go, yet." She said softly. "Are you that afraid of living for your own sake, instead of someone else's? Because if that's the case, you can… you can do it for *my* sake, all right? Because I… I don't want to lose you. I don't want…"

She faltered, then gathered her resolve, pushing forward to grasp his body in her arms, kissing him firmly as she tightened her hold on his spiritual form. He flinched, but did not resist her, and as she closed her eyes, she felt the connection of his life force against hers, growing and strengthening as she poured her own spirit into healing his battered, war-weary one. As she did so, the brief snippets of light began to grow more coherent, thoughts and images locking together to form sequences of memory, and beneath her touch she felt the spiritual likeness of the Meihi glitter and disperse into fragments of light, as each part of his being returned to its rightful place.

Suddenly exhausted both mentally and physically, she sank to her knees, closing her eyes again briefly as she re-ordered her thoughts once more.

"*You are an idiot, you know*." A soft voice pulled her from her

reverie and she started, gazing around her in vain as she sought the source of the words. "*Fools rush in — isn't that the saying? Why would you jeopardise your life to save mine*?"

Myoume faltered for a moment, then she sighed, reaching up to brush away the glittering, spectral tears that had even pierced her astral form.

"Because I love you." She whispered. "Even if you don't believe it — or understand. Your life is important to me — even if I never see you again. That's all. So even if it's selfish — I won't let you die. No matter what, Hyoushin… I *won't*."

"*Then let me return the favour.*" The voice uttered softly, and Myoume felt a sudden rush of wind against her senses, pushing her back the way she had come as she struggled to steady herself. Frantically she focused her thoughts, forcing herself back across the connection and into her own body as she shakily became aware once more of her physical surroundings. She withdrew her finger from the Meihi's skin, almost falling back as her exhaustion washed over her, and she felt strong arms grab her, as someone exclaimed her name. She blinked, trying to bring the world into focus, and as she did so, she recognised the person who had caught her.

"Aoi." She murmured, wetting her lips as she struggled to bring herself into a sitting position. "I… tried. Did it… work?"

"He's breathing again." Kintsusei murmured, wonder in his eyes as he gazed from the Meihi to the Byakko Seishi. "His pulse is back, and he's breathing. Toroki-sama — your power is truly amazing. To bring one back from the dead…"

"No… it wasn't that." Myoume dragged a shuddering breath into her lungs, glad that Aoiketsu had not released his grasp. "He wasn't… he hadn't gone. I just… stopped him. That's all. If he had died… I wouldn't have been able to have done it. But I… he was still… so…"

She swallowed hard, feeling sick and giddy, and Aoiketsu rested his hand on her arm.

"The doctor should see you too, probably." He murmured. "That took a hell of a lot of your strength, didn't it?"

"I wasn't going to let him die." Myoume reached up to brush away her tears. "I lost Miramu — I lost another person's life. But this one… I promised myself I wouldn't let anything happen to him if I could prevent it. So… so I think… he'll be all right. Now. And so will I, Aoi. I'm not weak — I'm Byakko's, after all. I didn't use… all of my energy

to pull him back. He wouldn't let me, in the end."

She offered a faint smile.

"I think he pushed me away, once he realised who I was and what I was doing." She added. "I don't think he wanted me to risk it… in the end."

"Hyoushin?" As the Meihi's eyelashes twitched and fluttered, Kintsusei was immediately alert, reaching out to touch his retainer's arm. "Hyoushin, can you hear me? Can you open your eyes? Please, open your eyes!"

Hyoushin's eyes flickered open, darting around him in confusion for a moment, and Kintsusei let out an exclamation, relief in his gaze.

"*Hyoushin*!"

"Heika…" Hyoushin murmured, then, as his gaze rested on Myoume. "And you…"

He trailed off, and Myoume nodded her head.

"You're not allowed to die." She told him firmly. "I promised myself. And I don't break promises I've made… just like you."

At this, a feeble smile touched Hyoushin's lips.

"Foolish." He whispered. Then his eyes closed again, and Aoiketsu let out a heavy sigh.

"He's all right after all." He said softly. "Thank you, Myoume. Whatever you did… thank you."

"Don't thank me for being selfish." Myoume shook her head. "I told you — I didn't want him to die, either."

"The doctor will be here soon." Kintsusei seemed to remember who and where he was, getting to his feet as he glanced down on his old friend. "And he'll get the best care possible, without doubt. I owe him that, at the very least — and much more, it seems, considering the situation. You too, Toroki-sama. You are always welcome here in Kutou — you know that, I presume?"

"Thank you, Kintsusei-heika." Myoume offered him a slight smile. "Although if I could… would you not call me by that name? I don't think I need to be… her any more. My name is Myoume — Geiyo Myoume. That's who I am now… I'd rather you called me by that name."

"Of course." Kintsusei nodded. "If that's what you want, then so be

it."

"It is." Myoume agreed. "Toroki is what my powers can do, I think. But Myoume… in the end Myoume really is… who I am."

She glanced at Hyoushin, a warm glow settling inside her as she remembered the encounter inside his mind. It had been instinctive, reckless and embarrassing, she realised, but even despite that, she found she didn't care. Finally the mix of emotions that had been stirring inside her had been clarified by words, and somehow she felt relieved that at last she knew what it had meant.

"I'm in love with him." She murmured softly, reaching down to touch his cheek as she registered his even, gentle breathing. "Hikari was right after all — or at least, that's how it's ended up. Byakko didn't make me see this — not in this way — but maybe that was deliberate. Perhaps it was because… in the end… noone can predict when they're going to fall in love. This wasn't to do with Toroki at all. It was to do with Myoume… it was a part of my *real* life, not my stellar one."

"Myoume?" Aoiketsu sent her a funny look, and she laughed, her cheeks pinkening as she realised how strange her gesture must have seemed.

"I've not lost my wits, even if I am mumbling to myself." She assured him. "I'm just tired… and a lot's happened. First my brother, now Hyoushin… and Hikari — is Hikari all right?"

"She'll be all right. She's pretty damn strong." Shishi nodded, glancing up from where she was still cradling the exhausted Miko in her arms. "She just wore herself out, that's all. She's sleeping, I think… but she'll be okay, and I promised to stay with her, so I will."

"When Maichu returns with Aishi-sensei, I'll have him look at her as well." Kintsusei got carefully to his feet, moving across the chamber towards where the two, bandit and schoolgirl were huddled.

"One so young… even with Kutou's crimes, she still came to save us. I can never thank her enough for the risk she took on our behalf. Kutou has been an undeserving land for far too long — but I won't let it continue. Now Kikei is gone — now at last I can push for peace. And I will. Hyoushin has always said that it's as much the will of the people as the will of the Gods, and I'm going to take that to heart. My own resolve is fixed, now. No matter what the difficulties ahead, I won't let them stop me from achieving my goal. Kutou *will* have peace — all those who have suffered won't have done so in vain."

Myoume saw Shishi gaze up at the Emperor thoughtfully, a pensive glitter in her bronze eyes.

“You’re a totally different kind of Emperor to Reizeitei-sama.” She said at length. “And I thought you must be kind of an idiot, really, to let so much happen without realising it. But I suppose, when it’s someone you trust who’s betrayed you, it’s a bit shit to have to face. So maybe you’re not so much of an idiot after all.”

Myoume winced, slowly shaking her head.

“Shishi-chan, that’s not any way to speak to an Emperor, even if he is a foreign one.” She chided. “Remember where you are, all right?”

“I’m in the remains of Kutou’s shrine.” Shishi said unrepentantly. “Which Hiki an’ I jus’ busted our guts riskin’ our lives to raise Seiryuu from. Besides, it’s the truth, ain’t it?”

Kintsusei knelt carefully down at her side, reaching across to touch Hikari’s shoulder gently. Then he sent Shishi a smile.

“Your words do not offend me.” He said quietly. “As you said, you spoke with truth. If I had more advisors who were willing to so act, I may not be quite as much of an idiot. It’s about time I stopped excusing myself as a King created by war, and resolved Kutou’s problems myself. And as for your Reizeitei-sama — I am keen to establish peaceful relations there, as well. There will be no more suspicion between Kutou and Kounan, if I have my way.”

He eyed her keenly.

“You are young too.” He reflected. “To take such a risk on our behalf. Your name is Shishi?”

“Yes.” Shishi agreed. “Shishi of Reikaku-zan.”

“Reikaku-zan.” Kintsusei pursed his lips. “The bandit mountain where the Suzaku warrior Tasuki rules?”

“Yes.” Shishi nodded. “He’s my father. And Jin — the bandit Miramu killed — he was my brother.”

“I see.” Kintsusei hesitated, then much to Myoume’s surprise, he bowed his head meekly in the young girl’s direction.

“I am sorry.” He murmured. “Please, convey that to your family as well. I cannot reverse that act any more than I can change any of the bad things Kutou has suffered in the past. But if there is a way to reach out a hand of apology to the bandits of Kounan’s south…”

“It’s all right.” Shishi frowned, shaking her head. She hesitated,

then,

"The only one Papa or anyone on the mountain blamed for that is Miramu." She admitted softly. "And for ages I thought… I wanted to see *him* die, as payback. That if Miramu was killed, it would somehow make Jin's death feel better. But I just… it doesn't feel as satisfying as I thought it would."

"Because in the end, it can't bring Jin back?" Myoume asked softly, and Shishi nodded.

"Even Seiryuu couldn't do that." She said simply. "So I guess what Hyoushin-san said was right, about revenge and it having no real purpose. Besides, now I really have no choice. There's no more point in blaming anyone for anything. It's the past and it can't be changed by anyone. Jin has to move on, and so do we. Papa, Okaa-san, and everyone on the mountain. And Kutou and Kounan… they have to, too."

She offered the Emperor a sad smile.

"So you don't need to apologise to me or my family." She added. "Jin died in conflict for his country. And now the conflict can end, so he didn't die in vain. Thanks to Hiki… thanks to her and everything today, I think I can finally see that clearly. And I'm ready… to let it go. I can't keep clinging to the past — Chichiri said that's how wars re-ignite and it's true. I don't want any more fighting or any more dying. So I think… it ends here."

"I agree." Myoume admitted softly. She took a deep breath, her gaze flitting back to her brother's cooling body, then to the unconscious Meihi, reassured by the gentle rise and fall of his chest.

"Miramu is gone, and it's for the best that he is." She acknowledged with a sigh. "But… so long as Hyoushin can survive… so long as Hikari doesn't take permanent harm… so long as Kutou can finally heal… nothing has been in vain. And we've done our job, Shishi-chan. You really aren't a cub any more, are you?"

"Guess not." Shishi looked rueful. "Guess I'm finally a full blown lion, huh?"

At that moment Maichu re-appeared, a flustered, white-clad middle-aged man in tow, and at the sight of him, Kintsusei's expression seemed to relax.

"Heika!" The man exclaimed. "What in Seiryuu's name… there were lights and I swear, we saw Seiryuu arcing over the palace…"

He faltered, stopping dead at the sight of Kikei's stiffening corpse, the blood that had pooled out from his throat wound congealing against the smooth stone of the shrine floor.

"Heika…"

"Kutou finally has it's peace, thanks to the coming of Seiryuu no Miko." Kintsusei gestured to the still sleeping Hikari. "But not without bloodshed. Aishi-sensei, Hyoushin has taken grave injury in my name, and the young girl herself is exhausted. Will you tend to them please?"

"But… Lord Kikei…"

"Kikei is a traitor to Kutou and he has been executed as such." Kintsusei got to his feet, and Myoume was aware of something more prepossessing in his bearing as he cast the physician a glance. "Please, Aishi-sensei. Time is of the essence."

"Yes, Heika." The doctor bowed his head, hurrying down at Hyoushin's side, and as he did so, Aoiketsu got reluctantly to his feet, pulling Myoume to hers and leading her away from the unconscious Meihi.

"Will Hikari and the Commander really be all right?" He asked softly. "And will *you*? You look worn out, Myoume… are you really okay?"

"Yes." Myoume agreed. "I'm tired, but I'm all right. And Hikari will be, too. I can feel her chi very strongly — as Shishi said, she's just sleeping. As for Hyoushin — now he can rest, I'm sure he'll be able to recover. I pulled him back from the edge — I think he'll go forward now."

She rubbed her temples.

"So must we." She added. "You too, Aoi-kun. This whole business has changed you somewhat too — regardless of what happens with Hikari from hereon in, will you continue to defend your Emperor by your blade?"

"I don't know." Aoiketsu admitted, then he frowned.

"Perhaps not." He owned. "I'm sort of afraid of this new soldier inside of me. My father's bitterness may have quieted now that Seiryuu's role is over, but it may not. I don't know how much of it is my own nature, after all — I may not know that until I do something I regret."

He smiled slightly.

“But I always did intend to take the exams and become an official, when Kutou had peace.” He added. “Maybe now I’ll do that — after all, it will still be a way to help my country — won’t it?”

“And Kutou needs men like you to help it, even now.” Myoume reflected. She smiled, resting her hand on his shoulder.

“Thank you for trusting in my brother, Aoi. Even though it was hard for you to do — thank you for giving him a chance to redeem himself, at least just a little.”

“He said that we were alike… that he couldn’t find the path beyond the darkness, but he thought that I had.” Aoiketsu said thoughtfully. “And I think I understand what he means, now. The dark edge swirling inside of me threatened to take over at times, when Kikei was spouting all that shit about the Commander. But I won’t let it control me completely. Miramu couldn’t fight his dark side. It engulfed him completely and he couldn’t find a way out. I think I’m going to remember that — remember everything he said, too. Because although I think it’s probably Hyoushin-sama’s training that made me strong enough to keep going, I’m half-sure Miramu’s warnings and remarks helped, too.”

He looked rueful.

“Is it crazy to think that he *wanted* to steer me away from following his fate?”

“No.” Myoume’s expression softened. “It’s just a sign to me that some of my brother was still alive after all, deep within his scarred heart.”

She cast another glance towards the still form, then shrugged.

“Now he has peace.” She said evenly. “I hate that I’ve lost him, but… I think it’s for the best. For his sake… it’s the right thing. That he was the one to die today. Because it was what he wanted… he wanted to let go of this life.”

She pinkened, glancing down at her hands.

“He was ready to go.” She murmured. “And I… I guess that in the end I… I’m not.”

“And Hikari will be relieved when she finds out you’re still here, too.” Aoiketsu offered her a grin. Myoume nodded.

“Yes, so it seems.” She agreed. “Speaking of which, Aoi-kun, I think she’s coming to. Don’t you think she’d like to see you, as she wakes?”

“Hikari?” Aoiketsu’s eyes widened, and he swung around, his clever blue eyes meeting Shishi’s bronze ones as the dark-haired Priestess in her arms began to stir. Without a word he was down at her side, reaching to grasp her pale fingers in his, and as she watched him, Myoume allowed herself a faint, bittersweet smile.

“And so a door closes and another opens.” She murmured. “So it seems to be, after all. Well, Miramu, perhaps you’re right. I *did* find my man of peace — even if I couldn’t tell you that he was a man you almost killed. I won’t let Hyoushin die — I won’t give up on him or on the future. For the both of us — for the Geiyo family — I will live. Toroki’s work is over, now. At last, maybe… I can have a life of my own. And… I won’t let things slip through my fingers. Thanks to Hikari and thanks to you, Oniichan… tomorrow will be a bright new day for more than just the people of Kutou. Somehow I know it.”

It was dark.

The moon shone high in the sky over Kutou’s royal palace as a single figure slipped through the ruins and rubble of the shrine towards the foot of the great gilted dragon statue. For a moment he gazed up at it, taking in the piercing azure gaze that glittered in the pale moonlight. Then, with a sigh, he dropped to his knees, bowing his head towards the effigy with a heavy heart.

“Seiryuu forgive me for what I’ve done.” He whispered. “Even if it means Kutou is now at peace. Even so… seeing you like that… in the sky over our heads. You really are there… you really do know everything about us and our lives here. And so that means you know… what I did in Kounan.”

“Maichu?”

At the sound of his name, the young man stiffened, half convinced for a moment that it had been the statue which had spoken and that even now some last vestiges of the God still lingered in the atmosphere. Then, as he registered the shadow of another person in the dim light, he sighed, putting a hand to his chest as he steadied his pounding heart.

“Aoi! Shit, don’t do that — I thought this friggin’ thing was speakin’ to me then!”

“The statue?” Aoiketsu looked startled, coming to join his companion as he gazed up at the dragon thoughtfully. “Why would you think that? Seiryuu was here, but he’s gone now. And this… it’s just metal, you know. Nothing else.”

“I… I know.” Maichu flushed, glancing at his hands. “Even so, though, of everything… it survived. And I… I guess… I…”

He faltered, and Aoiketsu’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. He placed a hand on his friend’s shoulder, leading him away from the dusty rubble towards the palace wall.

“You can’t sleep, huh?” He murmured, and Maichu shrugged.

“Today was a day like no other.” He owned. “What your girl did, Aoi — what Miramu did… what happened in that shrine… if I hadn’t been there I wouldn’t have believed it. I almost don’t, except I know what I saw. Gods in the sky, the glitter of magic… and a Miko with one hell of a lot of power stocked up inside of her. All of that… was why we got involved, wasn’t it? It’s why we came here… right?”

“Yes.” Aoiketsu agreed. “That’s right. Why?”

Maichu sighed heavily, rubbing his temples.

“It doesn’t feel finished.” He admitted. “I thought… if it was over, if we succeeded… it would vindicate everything some. At least, that I’d feel better about it. But if anything, coming back here… shit, Aoi, this evening we’re the toast of the Emperor an’ heroes at the Imperial Court. Yet…”

“Kayu isn’t here, huh?” Aoiketsu murmured, and slowly Maichu shook his head.

“That’s it exactly.” He said sadly. “He ain’t. An’ he never will be again, because of me. That’s hard to swallow.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong, you know.” Aoiketsu said frankly, guiding his companion towards the bright lights of the palace barracks. “You did your duty and protected your Commander from someone who aligned himself with a traitor to Kutou. You are a hero… you shouldn’t feel it’s any other way.”

“Do you think so?” Maichu eyed his friend quizzically. “Are you that willing to dismiss Kayu’s death because of the fact he got stupid an’ wound up with Kikei like he did?”

“No…” Aoiketsu owned. “No, I think it’s shit, too. But Maichu, you can’t keep dwelling on it like this. I mean, I hate that he’s gone. But I don’t blame you for it and nor will anyone else. The Emperor as much said so. He told you not to reflect on it, when he spoke to the court this evening, and publically cleared our names of suspicion of treason. He said it was done in his name, and it was not a crime. So you mustn’t think that it is. Even though he was our friend… you have to

move on."

"Don't you think I don't know that?" Maichu demanded, and Aoiketsu sighed.

"All right." He said resignedly. "I can see you're not going to be so easily talked around, or that I'm going to convince you to go to bed and get some sleep. So we might as well go home — mightn't we? We were in the palace as Kintsusei-heika's honoured guests — but the barracks is where we belong, and maybe there you'll feel more like yourself. Besides… I think there are other folk wanting to speak to you, and you haven't really seen anyone yet."

"Other folk?" Maichu looked bemused. "Such as?"

"Maichu!" As they reached the barracks, the door swung back, and in the glow of the inner light Maichu could make out the tall, broad form of Jakou, his expression one of relief and welcome. "Shit, so the spider scuttled out of trouble after all — we were wonderin' if you an' Aoi still planned on comin' back here, now you're Emperor's favourites an' all of that."

"Jakou." Despite himself Maichu managed a smile, shrugging his shoulders. "I thought you an' Ouno an' Bouri were in the Southern Province now? Ain't that right?"

"I guess we heard that there was a commotion at the palace." This time it was Bouri who spoke, as Aoiketsu ushered his friend inside, pushing the door shut behind them. "We rode back here this afternoon, after seeing blue lightning split the sky. Everyone's buzzing with what happened — Ouno swears blind he even saw Seiryuu arc overhead."

"Ouno, too?" Maichu looked startled, and Jakou nodded.

"Yeah." he agreed, gesturing towards the back of the mess hall, where the thin, nervous looking soldier was emerging from a crowd of others. "We had to come back an' congratulate you kids on a job well done."

"Congratulate, huh." Maichu frowned, and Jakou's eyes clouded as he dropped a heavy, reassuring hand down on his junior's shoulder.

"You needn't look that way." He said softly. "We were wrong… not you. In Hokkan, you were the only one who believed in the Commander enough to follow him an' that takes conviction an' guts. If anyone should be sorry about anythin', it's us."

"You followed the orders given." Aoiketsu pointed out, and Jakou

laughed ruefully.

“But they weren’t given by our Emperor, so it’s just as bad.” He said frankly. “No. In the end, you kids went out on a limb but you were right. An’ I guess we’ve learnt a bit from it too. Even if you *are* kids — you’ve taught us somethin’ about loyalty an’ common sense. We won’t forget so easy again.”

“It’s strange to be home.” Aoiketsu reflected. “After so long in the South, and in Hokkan — I must have been away for over a month, maybe even longer than that. It seems forever… I don’t feel like anything is the same.”

“It won’t be, now.” Ouno put in now, his big, expressive dark eyes flickering with excitement. “I saw him, you know. Over the sky. Seiryuu. He really came, didn’t he? You really brought Seiryuu no Miko to Kutou, didn’t you? You and Maichu and Hyoushin-sama?”

“Yes, with some help.” Aoiketsu agreed. “And now everything will change… at last, maybe, our land can rebuild.”

Maichu sank down onto an empty bench, folding his arms across his chest as he gazed around at the warm, buzzing chamber of soldiers that had once been such a home from home for him. It was a bare, plainly furnished room, with the minimum of amenities, yet he had always enjoyed spending time here. Often he and his fellows had conducted illicit after hour gaming beyond the soldier’s curfew, or on occasion he had been responsible for sneaking alcohol into the premises, somehow avoiding the watchful eye of the officer on duty. It was a place that held many happy, comforting memories of a childhood growing up with a goal in mind, and as he cast Aoiketsu a sidelong glance, he realised how much they had experienced together.

“Here.” Bouri’s voice at his elbow startled him and he glanced up, his eyes widening as he registered the bottle the older soldier thrust in his direction. At his expression, Bouri grinned, shrugging his shoulders.

“It’s a special occasion, so I guess noone had the heart to confiscate it.” He said evenly. “Drink up. You look like you need it, considerin’ the journey you’ve been on.”

“No kidding.” Maichu took the bottle gratefully, taking a sip of the cool, bitter Kutou ale. It too tasted of happy past memories, and for a moment he allowed himself to be caught up in the nostalgia of the moment, knowing that after everything, he and Aoiketsu were finally back home.

But, as he caught his friend's eye, he knew that somehow that still wasn't enough. As Aoiketsu had said, things had changed, and he sighed, setting the bottle down between his legs as he considered the situation over again.

"Maichu…" At the silence, Ouno dropped down in front of him, casting him a questioning look. "About Kayu…"

"Kayu…" Maichu frowned, then shook his head. "What about Kayu? He's not coming back, if that's your question. He's never coming back. He's in Kounan and he always will be, now. No matter what."

"We know what happened." Bouri said gravely. "I don't think a soldier here doesn't. But we don't hold you responsible, Maichu-kun. You did what you had to do… as I said, we were wrong. Not you."

"I keep telling him that." Aoiketsu sighed. "But he doesn't seem to absorb it."

"It's not that." Maichu said honestly. "I know what I did was the right thing. I don't regret it… I mean, I'd do it again, if he came at the Commander like that with Hyoushin-sama so hurt an' unable to fight. You don't draw your blade on your Commander, and shit, you don't fight a wounded man. He did two unforgivable things an' he did them in a traitor's name, so I had to make him listen the only way I could… words weren't enough. But even so… despite that…"

He sighed.

"He was my friend." He said flatly. "An' for that part of it I can't forgive myself. I know I did my duty… I just didn't think my duty would be as shit as that."

"If not for Miramu, it might have been worse." Aoiketsu reflected, and Maichu sent his friend a bemused look.

"If not for… *Miramu*?"

"If he hadn't doped the palace guard and the soldiers in the barracks the way he did to prevent interruptions, you might have had to fight more acquaintances." Aoiketsu responded. "As it is, Gai and the other youngsters are still cooling their heels in Tasuki's mountain cell… fighting someone you know isn't much fun, especially when you know you can't talk them round. If we'd come here like that…"

"It could have been worse." Jakou said grimly. "Kayu died without knowin' what a mistake he'd made, in fact. It just proves why politics are so friggin' complicated an' why soldiers should keep out of them."

“Well, not *this* soldier.” Aoiketsu said decidedly, and Bouri raised an eyebrow.

“What do you mean?” He asked curiously, and Aoiketsu shrugged.

“This whole thing has made me a better fighter, but I’m almost afraid of myself now.” He admitted. “And besides, with Kutou at peace, I don’t need to fight any more. I don’t… I don’t want to fight any more. So I’m not going to. At least, I’m going to speak to the Emperor and the Commander, when he recovers himself. And I’m going to ask permission to sit the exams and become an official. I always said I would — and I’ve twice as much reason to do so now. Kayu was the only other one who’d seen the battlefield first hand, and yet was educated enough to become an official and make a difference because of it. For his sake as well as mine, I need to do this. Somehow… I was born to help Kutou in war and in peace. Making peace is one thing. Keeping it is down to us. And I still want to do my bit… somehow.”

“You always did dream on clouds three miles higher than the rest of us.” Bouri reflected. “I guess that’s just you all over, Aoi-kun. But if that’s what you’ve decided… the army’ll miss your sword, but the court’ll be in safe hands.”

“I hope so.” Aoiketsu admitted. “In any case, I think I’m almost decided.”

“What about the girl?” Ouno asked curiously, and Aoiketsu reddened, shaking his head.

“Is there anything you people haven’t heard?” He demanded, and Jakou shrugged.

“Stories involving wenches spread quicker than any other… even the appearance of divine beings in the sky.” He said wisely. “An’ especially when it’s you that’s concerned. Maichu — well, that’s different. He’s charmed a thousand women in his time an’ it’s not even worth discussin’. But it ain’t common for *you* to get hot an’ heavy for some girl, Aoi. Ouno’s right — are you quittin’ the army so you can make some kind of home with her outside of the danger of war?”

“No.” Aoiketsu’s eyes clouded and Maichu saw a flicker of his friend’s true feelings in his gaze, although he kept his tones even. “Hikari is Seiryuu no Miko. She doesn’t belong in this world, and now she’s done her duty, she’ll go home. I can’t go with her, so that will be that. The Emperor gave me permission to ride to Kounan with her in order to see her off — but after that… she won’t be here. And I will. So.”

“Just like that, huh?” Bouri looked pensive. “Oh well. I guess you can just follow Maichu’s example — there are other fish in the sea, an’ he can probably introduce you to most of them. Almost seems odd to think of you thinkin’ that way — but I guess you had to grow up an’ discover girls eventually.”

“Maybe.” Aoiketsu agreed absently, and Maichu sent him a sidelong glance.

“You’re really quittin’ this place, then?” He asked softly, and Aoiketsu nodded.

“You know better than anyone why it’s a good idea I do.” He said frankly. “I’m too good a soldier, now. I can’t trust myself completely. And Kutou needs peace. It doesn’t need someone like my father — it needs something else.”

“You really are the Shougun’s get, huh?” Jakou eyed him keenly. “Shit, those blue eyes an’ we never guessed.”

“Yeah, well, things have a strange way of coming together.” Aoiketsu said evenly.

“I wonder what peacetime will mean for all of us as soldiers, in fact.” Ouno reflected. “I suppose that will change, too.”

“It can change, as far as I’m concerned.” Maichu got to his feet, moving to the window. “It can’t ever be the same, so it should change as much as friggin’ possible.”

“Maichu?” Aoiketsu sounded concerned, and Maichu turned, shrugging his shoulders.

“I wanted to be a soldier to save Kutou, an’ I’ve done it.” He murmured. “I wanted to be able to tell grandkids that I helped make this place peaceful, but I… I didn’t realise what it would mean doin’. An’ this place… it’s fine an’ all, but Kayu ain’t here. An’ that’s harder to get to grips with. That a friend could betray me… that I could betray him… that we could be so driven that one of us could kill the other. Because he would’ve killed me, too, sure as anything. And the Commander, too. That kind of Kayu I never knew before, and it makes me… hate the whole idea of it. People hide things… things are complicated. I don’t like it… I don’t think I can do it any more.”

“Maichu!?” Ouno stared. “Are you saying you’re quitting the army, too?”

“You won’t pass the exams, if you’re thinkin’ of following Aoi.” Bouri said bluntly. “You know it well as I do, Maichu — academic shit

ain't your style."

"I don't know what I want to do." Maichu admitted. "I just… I don't want to be a soldier any more."

As the words left his lips, he realised how true they were, and as he met Aoiketsu's startled expression, he nodded, his resolve hardening inside of him.

"I don't want to be a soldier any more." He repeated. "I can't fight battles that might be against friends. I can't do that again. It might be weak, an' maybe I'm a coward. But I don't want it to be my duty to fight people like that. I ain't ashamed that I protected my Commander, but I ain't proud that I killed someone in the process. An' even if I know that wasn't wrong — I don't like that bein' a soldier made it right. You guys are my friends, too… the thought of comin' here an' drawin' blades on you made me feel physically sick. I don't want to be in that position again. Kayu was enough… I can't do it again."

"Maichu." Aoiketsu murmured, and Maichu shrugged.

"It's how I feel." He said softly. "Tomorrow I'm goin' to go beg an audience with the Emperor an' try… and see if he'll let me… withdraw. An' then… I guess… I ain't got a choice but to go home to my family. Like Kisha did when he was injured — I ain't any use to my country any more, not feelin' like this. I've done my duty, an' I ain't ashamed. But it hurts like hell, especially bein' here. I need away from it."

His eyes darkened.

"Maybe I wasn't meant to be a soldier." He murmured. "Perhaps it doesn't suit me after all."

"It's just cold feet." Bouri said evenly. "Because you've been through shit an' it scared you. You're still just a kid, really, Maichu. Eighteen, no more. You've plenty of time to work it out of your system. Besides…"

"Besides, Kayu was my goddamn *friend*!" Maichu exclaimed, his frustration suddenly bubbling to the forefront as his temper took control of his senses. "My friend, above all other things! This place… these people, we're family — ain't we? That's how we've always been. We fight *for* each other, not *against* one another. An' I can't be doin' with it if it's any other way! Kutou's civil war divided even those people I thought I could trust with my life. If I'm a coward, then shit, I'm a coward. If I've lost my nerve, then dammit, that's what I've done. But that's how I feel an' that's what I intend to do. Even more, if

Aoi's no longer goin' to fight. I ain't gonna do it, either. Seiryuu's peace might save Kutou but it's goin' to take time for things to get on an even keel — we all know that without sayin' it. An' I've made my decision. I ain't goin' to spill any more blood in its name."

There was a moment of dead silence, as the surrounding soldiers stared at him as if he had grown another head. Then Aoiketsu sighed, placing his hands on his friend's shoulders.

"I wondered if you'd say that." He admitted. "If that's what you want, Maichu, then that's what you should do. I don't think you're a coward — dammit, we all know you're not. If that's how you can deal with this, then deal with it that way. Noone's going to try and stop you… after all, you've helped save Kutou. That duty's over… you don't have to do any more."

Something in his friend's gentle words penetrated Maichu's anger and he sighed, the frustration draining out of him as he sank back down, burying his head in his hands.

"I *am* a coward." He admitted. "But I think… I have to be. I ain't like that, Bouri. I can't be like that about it. This place… it's too soon to be back here. Everyone knows what I've done, an' why Kayu ain't here. Noone will blame me. But *I* blame me… so that ain't any good. It's like that bandit said — I'll blame myself longer than anyone else will. But even so, I have to work it out with myself somehow, if I'm goin' to live with it. I have to find another way to atone, maybe. I can't be here any more. It's too messed up… I can't."

"Bandit?" Jakou stared at him, and Aoiketsu nodded.

"Tasuki of Suzaku, in the Southern mountains." He agreed. "After Kayu died, Maichu spent the night on Reikaku-zan with the bandits there… somehow they seemed to get through to him more than any of us could. I don't know what was said, but I know it was that that gave Maichu the strength to come back here for the Emperor's sake."

"*Bandits*?" Ouno looked horrified. "When you're an Imperial Kutou soldier?"

"Tasuki is sort of different to ordinary bandits." Aoiketsu reflected. "He and his people more or less rule that region, and protect the local people. If it's a bad winter, they provide for them — they run a tight ship, and they fight their battles with rival groups to keep hold of their territory. But they're honest people. It might seem a conflict — but to be honest, Tasuki-san sort of reminds me of Maichu a little. He's just as direct a person."

“He helped me.” Maichu acknowledged. “He cleared my head a little… him and Shishi both. I don’t know… it didn’t seem quite so bad a thing there, with them, as it does back here where everything should be familiar but isn’t.”

Jakou and Bouri exchanged glances, and Jakou shrugged his shoulders.

“Sounds like you’ve decided already where you want to scuttle too, Maichu.” Bouri said frankly, and Maichu’s head shot up, staring at the older soldier in confusion.

“Huh?”

“Well, from what you jus’ said — are you tellin’ me it hadn’t occurred to you that you want to be back on that mountain with those bandit people, rather than here?”

“Back on…?” Maichu repeated blankly, and Aoiketsu’s eyes widened with comprehension.

“Bouri’s right.” He murmured. “You *do* sound that way. Like… like being on Reikaku-zan that night brought you peace, a little bit. You’ve been more composed since we left Kounan, but right now you’re not like that at all. Whatever Tasuki said to you, it really sank in. Maybe Bouri’s on the right track. Maybe here isn’t where you need to be after all.”

“You’re *telling* him to go join up with mountain bandits?” Ouno’s eyes almost fell out of his head, and Maichu frowned, digesting his friend’s words with difficulty.

“Go back to Reikaku-zan, huh?” He murmured, and as he did so, he felt a flicker of hope and relief mingle in his heart. “Shit. Maybe… maybe you’re right. Maybe that is…”

“Well, you ain’t any use goin’ back to your family when you ain’t got a clue how to help them out.” Jakou observed bluntly. “Bouri an’ Aoi are right. Sounds like you already made up your mind where you were goin’ to head for.”

“I hadn’t even thought about it.” Maichu admitted. “But when you say it… perhaps…”

He sighed.

“You’re right that going back to my family would be useless. Like Kisha, there ain’t nothing I can do to benefit them, and I hate bein’ in their way.” He added. “An’ if the Emperor does let me withdraw, then I can’t stay here, so…”

“So first thing in the morning we’ll talk to Shishi.” Aoiketsu suggested. “See if she has any violent objection to taking you home with her, when she goes.”

His eyes became sad.

“I’ll miss you like hell, if you do go.” He added. “But in the end, you’re messed up this way, an’ bein’ here… I didn’t think you’d cope with it, knowing Kayu wasn’t going to come back. So I think Bouri’s suggestion is the best one. Tomorrow we’ll see what can be done about it — all right?”

Maichu stared at his friend for a moment. Then, slowly, he nodded his head.

“I guess so.” He murmured. “Shit. I wonder what she will say. That kid was pretty good to me too, before, so I don’t think she hates me… but whether she wants me invading her home… still, Reikaku-zan… was different. An’ Tasuki-san…”

He faltered, shrugging his shoulders.

“Tomorrow.” He said finally. “Tomorrow, we’ll talk about it. When the sun’s finally up over the new Kutou.”

Chapter 28

Chapter Twenty Seven

It was a beautiful new day.

Hikari sat on the window seat of the palace chamber, pulling her robe more tightly around her aching body as she gazed dreamily out across the Kutou landscape. Where the shrine had proudly stood there now lay rubble and plaster, the ground coated in dust and fragments of blue gilting, but even despite the devastation, the golden form of the dragon still arched in his defiant pose, his glittering azure eyes gazing for the first time not at the cold wall of a stone chamber but across the land that he had come to protect. Somehow, Hikari mused absently to herself, it seemed fitting to be that way. As if, somehow, by summoning the God from the sky, she had reconnected Seiryuu with the people who lived in his shadow.

“At last he can see them, and they him.” She murmured, pressing her fingers to the glass as she absorbed the view. “And I helped. I did something… to make that real. It’s hard to believe… but I really did.”

“The sun is shining good and strong over Kutou this morning.”

A voice came from the doorway, and she turned, offering a smile as she met Myoume’s gaze. She nodded, gesturing for her friend to come join her, and the Seishi did as she was bidden, sinking down on the far end of the cushioned seat as she cast the younger girl a quizzical look.

“Well, Miko-sama?” She asked lightly. “Are you satisfied with what you see?”

“I’m a bit confused, to tell you the truth.” Hikari laughed ruefully, glancing at her hands. “A lot of what happened yesterday is a blur in my mind. I know they were inside of me — Suzaku, Seiryuu — both of them at different times. And I know that I didn’t dream it, although it seems that way right now. I can still… Suzaku is still there, flickering against my senses as if somehow by doing this I woke his power inside of me good and proper. It’s okay, though. It’s a nice feeling — a warm feeling, like I’m not alone. And Seiryuu — Seiryuu could have taken me, if he’d wanted. But he didn’t. I remember that.”

She sighed, her eyes clouding slightly as she remembered her final wish.

“He couldn’t bring Jin back, though.” She murmured regretfully. “Even he couldn’t do that.”

“Some things are beyond even the Gods, it seems.” Myoume folded her hands in her lap. “And maybe there are things they can’t control or understand, too.”

“I suppose.” Hikari acknowledged. She frowned, shooting her companion a sidelong glance.

“Myoume… are you all right?” She asked softly, and Myoume started, staring at her in surprise. Hikari smiled.

“I won’t lie.” She admitted. “I don’t remember much of yesterday, but Aoi came here first thing this morning, and he told me everything that I didn’t already know. So I know what went between you and your brother. And… and though I’m sorry for you that you… couldn’t reach him completely, I’m glad… that you’re still here.”

She reached out to grasp the older girl’s hand, squeezing it tightly.

“You’ve been good to me from the start.” She added. “So I’m happy that it was you who lived, even if it’s selfish.”

Myoume returned the smile with a rueful one of her own.

“It’s not selfish.” She murmured. “I love Miramu. I always will. But… for a moment, in that shrine, he let me see what he’d shielded from me for so long. And I think I know why he did, now. He cut himself off from me to protect me… for ten years, he’s done that. He parted us so he wouldn’t be able to hurt me, knowing how my visions are. And he took his life to ensure he couldn’t take mine. In the end, I suppose, I didn’t need to reach him — not as much as I thought. He already had it worked out. And he did it for my sake… because he didn’t want me to die.”

She sighed, shaking her head.

“The truth is, *I’m* the selfish one.” She confessed. “Because… though I would have died for Byakko in there, I… didn’t want to do it. Before I met you and Shishi and Jin, I didn’t really care about life or death. My duty was first and foremost on my mind, and I withdrew from even my family to do my job protecting the Shinzahou. But you… it wasn’t like I was joining with people just to fight for a cause. I made friends with you, too. You made me a part of something I didn’t think I could be part of… and now… it’s more than that. I wanted to live… so… I won’t say I’m happy. I can’t be that completely, not when Miramu is lost to me. But I’m relieved. It’s over. At last. And I feel like a curse has been lifted off me.”

She tilted her head on one side.

“Hikari, what about Aoi? You know that now you’re done with this, you’ll go back home, don’t you?”

“Yes, although I haven’t yet.” Hikari sighed. “I love him, Myoume. But I… I couldn’t wish for it. It’s like Aoi said. It shouldn’t be that way. I love him… Suiko said to me that I couldn’t let my feelings get in the way, though. And she was right, so I didn’t. I did the right thing. It’s just… going to hurt, when we say goodbye. So long as magic doesn’t intervene, I intend to go back to Kounan with Shishi before I go home. And Aoi said he’d ride with us, so it’s not just yet. I want to see Chichiri and Tasuki and everyone there before I leave.”

She bit her lip.

“The truth is, this time, when I leave I’ll probably not ever come back.”

“Such is the Miko’s role.” Myoume agreed sadly. “I’ll miss you too, you know. Maybe I’ll ride with you to Kounan, also. I have to take Miramu’s ashes to the West, after all… it’s one way of getting there, and not much out of my way. Not at all, in fact, if I take the mountain path into Sairou.”

“I’d like it, if you did.” Hikari admitted. “I know I have to say goodbye to people, but I’d rather it wasn’t quite so soon as this.”

“Then it’s settled.” Myoume nodded her head. “That’s what I’ll do.”

She sat back against the stone, gazing out across the land.

“Kutou can rebuild, now. Kintsusei-sama can finally be a King who leads a peaceful kingdom.” She reflected. “It’s a tremendous thing, Hikari. What you’ve done here.”

“I suppose.” Hikari pinkened. “I just wish that so many people hadn’t had to make so many sacrifices. I was stupid so many times, I think… and I’ll always wish that I could have prevented Jin’s death.”

She pursed her lips.

“Myoume, what about Hyoushin-san? I know that he was forcing himself through the pain these last few days, and Aoi said something this morning about him being in a deep sleep. Is he… will he live through this? Or…?”

“Hyoushin…” Myoume sighed, and Hikari saw a strange look enter her friend’s deep blue eyes. “In the shrine, he almost died. But I think… he’s just exhausted. He’s sleeping because his body’s finally

rebelled against everything he's put it through and told him he needs to rest if he's going to recover. He doesn't need to hold out any more, and that's all. His chi was strong when I left him last night, so I think… he'll be fine."

"Good." Hikari looked relieved. "Because he went through so much to find me, and more, to keep faith with his Emperor and Kutou even despite everything. I understand why Aoi looks up to him… I didn't want him to die."

"Me either." Myoume shook her head. She paused, then, "Hikari, whilst we're alone… can I tell you something?"

"Tell me?" Hikari looked startled, and Myoume nodded, a faint flush touching her cheeks.

"Something I've not told anyone, yet. Not really." She admitted, toying with her hands as she met Hikari's gaze hesitantly. "But even so, you said I could trust you. And I do… besides, you were the one who… said it. Originally. And I… wanted you to know… that you were right."

"You've lost me." Hikari looked befuddled. "I'm still tired and muggy, Myoume — you're going to have to be clearer than that."

"It's about Hyoushin." Myoume's colour deepened and she dropped her gaze. "Yesterday, in the shrine, I realised… that Byakko didn't make me see him because we were meant to help Kutou. Or at least, maybe he did. I don't know. But either way… he's… not just an ally to me. I mean… in the end…"

"Oh!" Hikari's eyes widened as she understood her friend's faltering, awkward words, and she grasped Myoume's hands in hers, her eyes shining with excitement.

"You mean he really *is* your soulmate, after all?" She demanded. "That's so romantic — after everything, to think that you…"

"I don't know about soulmate." Myoume held up her hands, shaking her head. "No, I don't think… well, I don't know. I'm blind, this time. I can't see what's ahead or what any of it means — I don't think I'm meant to. But I do… I mean…"

She sighed, rubbing her temples.

"You're in love with him." Hikari murmured, and Myoume nodded.

"Yes." She whispered. "I guess I knew it before… I knew it from that time I broke into his thoughts and sent him to sleep. That was when I saw for the first time who he really was, and understood… all

the things he doesn't say or show. But I didn't have a word for it till yesterday, when I pulled him back from the brink of death. And then… then I knew that I needed him to live because I wanted to see him. Not because of Kutou, or anything else. I just… I wanted to keep him here, because of how I felt."

She groaned, running her fingers through her thick white hair.

"I'm selfish, but I couldn't even let him go when he was so tired and in so much pain." She added. "But Miramu… he said that I should be with my man of peace. And he… he's right. That's what I want, too. I just don't know… what Hyoushin thinks about it."

"He'd be a fool if he rejected you." Hikari said decidedly. "Besides, he seems to respect you. Though it's hard to know what he's thinking… I don't think it's all that strange that you feel that way."

She grinned.

"It's exciting." She added. "Don't you think so?"

"Really?" Myoume sighed. "I'm a little afraid of it. I've never had something like this inside of me before. I've always seen pathways and linked them together, but I don't see this one. I can't visualise anything… for the first time I'm acting entirely on my own whims. It's scary to say the least."

"Love is though. Right?" Hikari eyed her playfully, and Myoume nodded.

"I suppose." She acknowledged. "Yes. I suppose it is."

"Well, if it works out for you, at least one of us will have a happy ending." Hikari reflected. "Aoi and I are doomed to be parted, so it might as well be you."

"I wish there was a way around that." Myoume pursed her lips, and Hikari shrugged.

"Right now I can rationalise it, though I might not, when it's time to leave." She responded. "But right now I want to talk to you about this crush of yours. I haven't had a girly chat like that with anyone in what seems like ages… Shishi just doesn't care about all that stuff, and besides, I sort of feel like you've become a kind of big sister in some ways. So it's fun, sometimes, to talk like that about guys… don't you think?"

"I suppose so." Myoume looked surprised. "I never have before. But I don't have a sister either… so I suppose that's why."

“Brothers are overrated.” Hikari said decidedly. “Girls are much better.”

She dimpled.

“So, when he wakes up, will you tell him?” She demanded. Myoume shrugged.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do yet.” She confessed. “I’ll come with you when you leave… if he wakes before then, I’ll see him. But if he doesn’t… I guess…”

“You’ll chicken out and run away.” Hikari scolded, and Myoume shook her head.

“No.” She replied. “I’m not going to do that. I know how I feel, and that the idea of not seeing him again is more frightening than dying for Byakko’s cause. That’s how strong it is inside of me… I can’t escape it, and I don’t think I wholly want to. But I must go to Sairou — for Miramu’s sake, and for Mother’s — she has to know that in the end, he did become Amefuri and he did protect me. He did his part, Hikari. Mother needs to know that, too. So that’s my duty, first and foremost. To take my brother home.”

Hikari’s expression softened.

“I suppose it is.” She conceded. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s okay.” Myoume smiled. “And I won’t run away. I intend on seeing him again, before we leave — even if he’s still sleeping then. And I… when I’ve been home, I think… I’ll come back to Kutou. Kintsusei-sama has already told me I’m welcome here, and I intend to take that seriously. I don’t want to stay in Sairou — I never fitted into the village, and if I was there, I’d probably only be a bother for my parents. Besides, Mother would tell me to follow my heart.”

She pinkened.

“She’ll be beside herself if she thinks her daughter’s doing something like a normal young woman for once.” She admitted.

“Hyoushin-san’s older than you, isn’t he?” Hikari looked thoughtful. “Let me see… Aoi is eighteen, and Hyoushin-san was just about an adult when he was born, so…”

“Hyoushin is thirty five. He told me so himself.” Myoume nodded. “And I’m twenty one in the autumn… do you think it’s too wide a gap?”

“No…” Hikari considered. “Not considering it’s you.”

“Meaning?” Myoume stared, and Hikari smiled.

“You’re not immature.” She replied. “I said you were like a big sister, but sometimes when we were travelling you could be like a mother, too. You guided us, after all. And you… with Hyoushin-san, it doesn’t seem like that much of an age gap, when it’s you. I mean, I’m only five years younger than you, but there seems a huge gap between him and me. Even between him and Aoi, because he is like Aoi’s dad. But you… I don’t know. You don’t even call him Hyoushin-san like I do. It’s different somehow.”

She smiled at Myoume’s self-conscious expression, spreading her hands.

“You’re the same with Chichiri and Tasuki, like you’re easily of their generation.” She added. “It’s not that you seem old or anything, but still… it makes sense. I don’t think it’s too big a gap at all, Myoume. Besides… when it’s true love… who cares about that, anyway? I think it’s romantic — and that Hyoushin-san would be an idiot to turn you away.”

“Well, he might still.” Myoume folded her hands together with a sigh. “He has a lot of things… inside of him, there are a lot of matters he has to settle and come to terms with, I think. I can’t really explain — but…”

“I guess when you’ve been a slave like he has, it must make some sucky memories.” Hikari said pensively. “But still, it’s a long time ago, you know. I think it’ll be fine… he’s a grown man now, after all. And he doesn’t have to run around the country stealing relics and stuff any more.”

Her eyes widened.

“That reminds me… what about Byakko’s treasures? If you’re not going to go back and guard them, what will happen to them?”

“I don’t know where they are.” Myoume admitted, and Hikari frowned.

“You don’t…”

“When you summoned Seiryuu — when the Gods appeared and the shrine was destroyed, they disappeared.” Myoume shrugged. “Suiko and Kitora’s relics, too. The only Shinzahou whose whereabouts we know is you. The others have gone… I guess the Gods took them with them when they left Kutou’s sky.”

“To hide them for the next time?”

“Probably.” Myoume nodded. “But if nothing else, it’s a clear indication to me that Byakko’s let me go now. My work for him is done — Toroki can sleep again. I can live my own life — like Chichiri and Tasuki have, in the South.”

“Then it’s for the best that they’re gone.” Hikari said decidedly. “Because you have a happy ever after to run after now, and it’d suck if something got in the way of it.”

“When you say it that way, it sounds really simple.” Myoume laughed, and Hikari nodded.

“That’s because it is.” She said frankly.

She stretched, stifling a yawn as she did so.

“I should get up.” She murmured. “Where’s Shishi… is she all right? I know she was hurt yesterday, by Kitora in the shrine.”

“She’s all right.” Myoume agreed. “Her arm wasn’t badly hurt — just a flesh wound. She and Maichu are with Aoi… actually, I think they may be going to see the Emperor about something, to be honest. She said that she’d see you when it was time for eats — so I suppose that’s how it is.”

“Shishi… to see the… Emperor of Kutou?” Hikari looked blank, and Myoume nodded.

“I think it concerns Maichu.” She said evenly. “You’ll have to ask her, though. I just overheard them this morning, talking it out.”

“Is it about Kayu’s death, then?” Hikari felt a flicker of anxiety stir within her. “He isn’t going to be in trouble… is he?”

“No, he won’t be.” Myoume shook her head. “It’s not like that. As I said, ask Shishi. She knows more of the details than I do.”

She smiled, getting to her feet.

“You shouldn’t think about getting up when you can still yawn like that.” She added. “So I’ll leave you to rest. I have another patient to visit, in any case.”

“Yes, you do.” Hikari agreed. “Give him my best wishes… and make sure you don’t chicken out on this, okay? I won’t tell anyone what you told me, but if you don’t do anything about it, I’ll be really mad. Even from the other world — I’ll find a way to haunt you, so keep it in mind!”

“So that’s how it is.”

Kintsusei sighed, rubbing his chin absently as he glanced down at the three youngsters that bowed before him. In the centre was the young bandit girl, her shock of vivid red hair in direct contrast to her companions’ darkness, and as his gaze rested on her, she glanced up, meeting his eyes with sober bronze ones of her own.

“It was pretty sh… bad for Maichu in Kounan, after it happened.” She said slowly, her words edged with the distinctive roll of a southern mountain accent. “An’ I understand that. Noone likes to feel like they screwed over a friend, after all.”

“No, that is true.” Kintsusei’s gaze shifted from the young girl to the anxious looking Maichu. Although he had not spent as much time observing the middle Shi child as much as he had watched Aoiketsu’s progress, he was struck by the uncharacteristic shadows beneath the boy’s eyes, and the faint pallor in his cheeks that told of an unspoken mental strain. Maichu was strong, he knew that, and yet the anguish of his actions haunted him, and he realised with a jolt that the decision he made now could make or break the young man’s future.

He sighed again, then slowly got to his feet, stepping down from the dais as he paused at Maichu’s side.

“Stand, Shi Maichu. I want you to look me in the eye and tell me that this is truly what you wish to do.” He said quietly. Maichu started, then nodded, scrambling inelegantly to his feet as he did as he was bidden.

“Yes, sire. It is, sire. After Aoi and I discussed it last night… I didn’t sleep much for thinking on it. An’ I think… it’s the right thing. I mean…”

He frowned, and the Emperor could tell he was mulling something over.

“It might be runnin’ away from my demons.” He admitted honestly. “I don’t know, yet. Actin’ in your name is what I was trained for an’ I don’t regret that I did that. It’s just… this place… ain’t like it was before. An’ I don’t like it. It’s not just somethin’ that’s goin’ to square up an’ go away. I can fight with a sword, but I don’t want to fight the people I care about. An’ if I stay as a soldier, it might happen again. I don’t think I’m strong enough to do that, Heika. An’ I don’t want to let you down any more than I want to kill any more of my buddies.”

Kintsusei’s eyes softened, and he nodded his head.

“In my eyes, you have committed no crime.” He said softly. “But

equally, nor did Kayu. Both of you acted in the way you believed was best, attempting to serve me although Kayu was deceived. I too was deceived — I must carry some of the burden of blame for the incident in Kounan. And as such, I must accept the consequences. You are a fine soldier, Shi Maichu. Your loyalty is second to none and your commitment beyond reproach. I am sorry to lose you. But I have already asked much of you… it would be wrong of me to ask for more."

"Heika?" Maichu's eyes widened, and Kintsusei smiled, resting a hand on the young man's shoulder.

"Shishi, you represent your people here before me." He said frankly, and the young bandit nodded her head, not seeming to be at all awed by the Emperor's sudden attention.

"Yes, sire?"

"You believe that your father would accept this situation? That if I were to release Maichu from his military duties, he would be admitted into Reikaku-zan's clan? I understand that your bandits operate in a different, unique way from other bandits — that you protect the poorer people that surround you, and fight foes to keep them safe. If this is the case, I can understand why Maichu would belong there. But I must know from you — I must have your word — that if I so grant him his release, you will not turn him away."

Shishi frowned for a moment, then she shrugged her shoulders.

"Papa is Kashira on Reikaku-zan." She said levelly. "And it was Papa who talked sense into Maichu, after Kayu died. It'll be okay, Kintsusei-sama. Maichu's rough but he'll adjust… the mountain is a pretty direct place an' noone there would judge him for what happened with Kayu. Sure as hell I don't think it matters — to me the guy was an enemy who threatened to hurt people, an' Maichu did the only thing he could. Others on Reikaku-zan think the same way — Papa included. So I don't think it'd be a problem."

She eyed Maichu pensively, then,

"He'll have to learn how to be a proper bandit, of course." She added. "As you said, Heika, Reikaku-zan isn't like other bandit strongholds an' Papa rules the South West with Reizeitei-sama's blessing. So it's not like drawin' your sword an' fightin' for ale an' shit. But even so… even so, I don't think it'd be a problem. If that's the way he feels… I think you should let him go."

"Yes, I think so also." Kintsusei admitted. "Sorry as it makes me, I

can see no other choice. I will not force a man who risked everything to save me into fighting yet again in my name. He has sacrificed enough."

He cast Maichu a glance, absorbing the relief that glittered in the young soldier's expression.

"You are too honest for Kutou's twisted political system, I think." He murmured, more than half to himself. "I am sorry, Shi Maichu. I feel I have committed a grave sin against you in allowing this to happen. In return, I have no option but to grant you your request for discharge. But know that it doesn't change my gratitude towards you — not only for defending my name, but for protecting Hyoushin when noone else was able to do so. His survival now is in part down to your actions — and you have no idea how important a factor that is to me. I will discharge you, but I will do so with honour… so long as you remember that you are still in my trust, even in the Southern mountains."

"Yes, Heika." Maichu's eyes widened with wonder, and he nodded his head. "I understand. Th… thank you. I mean… I don't know what kind of a bandit I'll make, or any of that, yet. But I need to try… and do something else. An' Tasuki-san… I think he understood me… he knew how I felt. So… I think… it's the best thing to do."

"In which case, Shishi of Reikaku-zan, I entrust Shi Maichu to you." Kintsusei said gravely, and Shishi bowed her head.

"Yes, sire." She agreed. "Leave him to me — I'll kick sense into him."

Despite himself, Kintsusei smiled at the bandit's off-hand remark. His gaze flitted to the final member of the group, who as yet had remained silent throughout the discussion.

"Aoiketsu, do you have nothing to say in this matter?" He asked softly, and Aoiketsu raised his head, a flicker of reticence in his blue eyes.

"I'll miss Maichu, but I think it's the right thing." He said honestly. "I don't want him to go crazy staying here, and I think he would, if he did. He's not like me… or like any of the others, Heika. I would… I think I would have killed Kayu and still been angry at him, if it was me. Maichu's more forgiving than I am, and I know it'll bother him more than it will anyone else."

He pursed his lips.

"I know you've already given me permission to ride with Hikari and

Shishi south." He added. "I will return to Kutou — I must. After all, I want to take up my studies again and enter the official examinations to continue serving the East in some way beyond my sword. But… would it be all right… if I stayed a few days in Kounan? I may not see Maichu again for some time, and I will be parting from Hikari completely. If it is not too much trouble, Heika…"

Kintsusei shook his head.

"You may do as you see fit." He said, a twinkle in his dark eyes. "Your judgement seems wise to me, Kaiga Aoiketsu. You have my blessing."

"Thank you, Kintsusei-sama." Aoiketsu bowed his head, his long tail of hair falling over his shoulder, and Kintsusei sighed, folding his hands together as he surveyed them.

"This business has not been without a heavy cost." He murmured. "Yet that we have survived it and can now learn from it and rebuild — for this I am grateful. Aoiketsu, I will be trusting you and Maichu too to ensure the safe passage of Seiryuu no Miko as she returns to Kounan and then to her own world. Maichu, this will be the last duty I will ask you to undertake as a soldier of my retinue — do you both accept?"

"Yes, sire." As one man, the two soldiers replied, bowing their heads in acknowledgement, and Kintsusei nodded, raising his hand.

"You are then dismissed." He said softly. "I wish you luck, Shi Maichu, in the future you have chosen."

With that the three youngsters withdrew, and as the chamber door shut behind them, Kintsusei let out a heavy sigh.

"I cannot refuse such a request, when I see such anguish in the boy's eyes." He murmured to himself aloud. "And I hope Hyoushin will forgive me, when he finds out what I have done. Maichu's suffering is my fault — noone else's. I should have been more astute, and more perceptive to what was going on. Kayu's death is on my conscience, yet Maichu must live with the memory of it… if releasing him will help him overcome that, so it must be."

"Heika?"

A voice from the rear chamber startled him, and he turned, offering the doctor a tired smile.

Aishi-sensei… I'm sorry. You've come to report to me and I'm standing here talking to myself — you must wonder if I've lost my

mind."

"A good deal has happened in the last twenty four hours, my Lord. I imagine most of us feel a little that way this morning." Aishi said drolly, and Kintsusei laughed, nodding his head in acknowledgement.

"There is truth in that." He agreed. "Well? How fare the patients this morning? Hyoushin has passed a safe night, I trust? And Seiryuu no Miko — she is recovering, too?"

"You need not concern yourself on Seiryuu no Miko-sama's behalf." Aishi said simply. "She is a fit young girl and has slept through most of her tiredness already. To command the Gods and escape unscathed is beyond my understanding, but she is not from our world and so… perhaps… this is the reason why. Either way, she is quite well this morning."

"And Hyoushin?"

"Hyoushin-dono still sleeps, Highness." Aishi admitted. "Yet I am content with his condition and I do not feel he is in danger. His body is worn and tired from his exertions — but I am satisfied that there is no longer poison in his system. He has pushed himself too far, that is all. The heat coupled with his injury during his time down south has taken his toll, and I have been told by the Western girl that he has not eaten well since he left Hokkan. It may take time for him to recover fully — particularly the use of his left arm, which seems to have been badly scarred. But I believe he *will* recover… given time, I believe he will be well."

"Good." Relief flickered in Kintsusei's gaze. "He can have all the time he wants. I owe him that, at the very least. If I had lost his life in all of this, Aishi, I don't believe I ever would have forgiven myself. I promised him eighteen years ago that I would offer him protection. I have failed to do that, in the end… but as he still lives, I may yet make it up to him."

"He has always been of strong body and mind, Heika." Aishi said wisely. "I do not expect him to succumb."

"When you say the Western girl — you mean Myoume? Byakko's Toroki-sama?"

"Yes, sire." Aishi nodded his head. "She seems to have played an active role in Hyoushin-dono's care since his injury… and she was able to give me quite some information on events. Her people appear to be apothecaries, and her knowledge is basic but sound."

"It seems I am much in the debt of foreign Seishi." Kintsusei

murmured. “Well, so be it. I must make time to see her and thank her formally before she leaves to take her brother home. All arrangements for his cremation have been made, I trust? In the absence of a royal Shrine Priest, an alternative has been settled upon?”

“Yes, Heika. So I understand.” Aishi said respectfully. “It is not my particular area of expertise, yet I have heard that the ceremony will take place later this afternoon.”

“Then that is well.” Kintsusei looked approving. “Thank you, Aishi-sensei. And for your continued attention to my injured friend — for that also. I will not keep you any longer… we both, it seems, have much to do in rebuilding this shattered country and its bruised population into something worthy of foreign respect.”

“Well, it was as simple as that.”

As they left the royal chambers, Shishi kicked absently at a pebble, turning to offer her companion a grin. “Your Emperor sure is a soft touch, you know — you hardly had to do any grovelling at all to convince him of your case.”

She paused, eying him speculatively.

“Or maybe it’s just he’s secretly glad to be rid of you.” She mused. “Since you are a clot when you put your mind to it.”

“Shut up.” Maichu glared back at her. “He’s a reasonable guy, that’s all. He realised that it was important to me to go.”

“I think it was more than that.” Aoiketsu reflected. “Kintsusei-sama really does feel to blame for it, Maichu. I honestly think he meant that — that he feels it was his fault for not preventing Kayu’s trip to the South… or interfering in Kikei’s instructions more closely.”

“Well, he ain’t wrong.” Shishi said simply. “He’s the captain an’ it’s his fault too if the ship springs a leak — right?”

“Don’t use boat analogies.” Maichu ordered. “There ain’t any of those in the Southern mountains, an’ I’m quite happy for it to stay that way.”

“Huh?” Shishi looked blank, and Aoiketsu laughed.

“Maichu gets horribly seasick.” He said, amused. “As we discovered on our first trip out to Sairou. He was really quite pathetic — a whole week and he barely left the cabin except to puke his guts up over the side.”

“Shut up.” Maichu reddened. “She doesn’t need to know any of that

shit. I ain't goin' to be gettin' on a boat again any time soon, after all."

"Guess that's true." Aoiketsu relented, and Shishi snorted.

"You an' the Kashira'll get on real well, then." She reflected. "He ain't never admitted it to me, but Chichiri once told me he hated water so much because he got seasick when it came to boats an' shit. Even now he doesn't swim, either, though Okaa-san an' I both do, an' Jin swam like a fish. He says it's because Suzaku's magic inside him is fire-based, an' that water an' fire don't mix. But I think he actually hates it… so if you feel the same, you'll get on great."

"See?" Maichu sent Aoiketsu a triumphant look. "It ain't abnormal to get queasy when the whole world round you's swingin' about! It's not like hurlin' at the slightest sign of blood, so you keep your comments to yourself, Aoi!"

"Well, I seem to have shaken that off now." Aoiketsu pursed his lips, his expression becoming thoughtful. "I never thought I'd say it, but I almost wish I hadn't. It does feel more like the barrier between me and hot-blooded killer instinct is gone now. On a battlefield — who knows what I might do? In the shrine I felt close to going into a red haze and just losing my grip on things… in an actual fight I'd probably take it to the next step."

"I can't see it, somehow." Maichu shook his head. "You're too level — you always have been. You ain't never fought when there's been no need — the Commander taught you that, an' you absorbed it better'n anyone."

"Still, it makes you wonder what kind of shit went through Nakago's head, doesn't it?" Shishi looked uncharacteristically thoughtful. "Considerin' it's his blood that makes you fight that way."

"No kidding." Aoiketsu said ruefully. He paused, glancing across the palace grounds, then, "Before we go to Kounan, I ought to go pay respects to my mother, come to think of it. Now I understand what her secrets were. I've never been there except to ask questions — but this time I think I want to… to thank her. If that makes sense."

"Not really, but nor do you, always." Maichu eyed him keenly. "Why thank her? The woman's been dead your whole life… what are you thanking her for?"

"Aside from giving me life?" Aoiketsu tilted his head on his side, considering. "I think… for ensuring I didn't end up like my father. In the situation I was in… she gave everything to ensure I was born safely. She came and grovelled before the Emperor, not knowing

whether a new King would honour Nakago's word to her and guarantee her protection. And even then, she humbled herself before a former slave to ensure there would be someone to guide me. And she made a good choice, too. Of all people, she chose the one person capable of teaching me to fight the opposite way from my father. So I didn't turn out like him — and I didn't fall into the same kind of traps. For doing all of that, I suppose — I need to thank her."

He glanced up at the sky.

"Maybe she was a stronger woman than I realised."

"I keep tellin' you both that there's nothin' weak an' wimpish about girls." Shishi said bluntly. "Maybe you'll start to believe me, now."

"Depends on the girl." Maichu said evenly. "If you gave my sister a sword she'd probably scream or faint or both. She's like that."

He looked rueful.

"If I wasn't goin' to Reikaku-zan, I'd have to go back home an' deal with it." He added. "So I'm glad there's another option. I don't hate my family, but I sure as hell ain't like them."

"Tasuki won't mind, will he? You turning up with Maichu?" Aoiketsu asked, and Shishi shook her head.

"No. And even if he did, I've given Kintsusei-sama my word, so he won't break it." She said wisely. "Bandits believe in honour, after all. Besides, Maichu's a moron but his morals are in the right place an' he ain't bad with a sword. So Kashira won't mind. He'll be all right with it, I'm pretty sure."

"Will you stop calling me stupid already?" Maichu demanded. "I am here, you know, and I can hear you."

"You three are making enough noise to wake the dead, you know."

Before Shishi could retort, a fresh voice interrupted the conversation, and they turned, Shishi letting out an exclamation as she registered the speaker.

"Hiki! I thought you were meant to be resting!"

"I was, but I was bored, and after Myoume came to see me I couldn't get back to sleep." Hikari owned, pulling her cloak more tightly around her body as she offered her friend a rueful smile. "She's gone on an errand of her own, so I decided I might as well dress and come find you people. Myoume said you were with the Emperor — it got me curious. What's going on?"

“Maichu’s not staying in Kutou when we leave.” Shishi said simply. “He’s comin’ to the south with us instead.”

“To the south?” Hikari cast the soldier a confused glance, and Maichu nodded.

“To Reikaku-zan.” He agreed. “I can’t stay in this place — too much hangin’ over it. So that’s what I’m goin’ to do. After all, I’m trained to use a sword, an’ Reikaku-zan’s job is to protect people around the mountain area — right? I might as well use what I know to some good, even if I can’t fight for Kutou any more.”

“I see.” Hikari’s expression softened. “That does make sense. It’s easy to forget that we saved Kutou but… a lot still needs to happen, and a lot of people got hurt because of it. I suppose those things aren’t so easily healed.”

“No kidding.” Maichu said ruefully. “But I’ll cope. We all will.”

“You probably should be careful walking around unattended out here, you know.” Aoiketsu cast Hikari a reproachful look. “To us you’re Hikari, but to the people of Kutou you’re the saviour who summoned the Gods over the skies and brought them hope for the future. Unless you want to be crowded and worshipped, you should be a bit more cautious about where you go and what you do.”

“Well, she ain’t alone now we’re with her, so it’s no problem.” Shishi said with a shrug. “If anyone gets too close an’ tries to prod her, I’ll prod them back with my sword.”

“You would, as well.” Hikari laughed, nodding her head. “I should be all right, if I have you guys watching out for me.”

“You don’t seem that beat up, considerin’ what you did yesterday.” Maichu eyed her critically. “Or doesn’t it hurt after all, to have a dragon god inside of you?”

“It hurt like hell.” Hikari said ruefully, putting an absent-minded hand to her chest as she did so. “But I feel more or less all right, now. Seiryuu didn’t try and take me, after all. He told me he’d promised Suzaku that if I saved Kutou he’d spare me, and he did. I’m a bit achey and tired but I’m okay. And besides, being shut in a big fancy bedroom like that is kinda unnerving. When the woman bringing breakfast addressed me as Miko-sama and bowed before me, it really freaked me out.”

“That’s why you need to be careful.” Aoiketsu said meaningfully. “Everyone will want a piece of you, while you’re here.”

“I *am* still here, however.” Hikari glanced at her hands, then at her companions. “Am I meant to be? I don’t know how this works, but I thought the Miko went back home after she summoned the God. Isn’t that how the stories all go?”

“Dunno.” Shishi admitted. “Didn’t your Mother break the rules in any case, raising Suzaku in her world instead of in this one? God knows how it’s supposed to finish up. Maybe you need to go back to the place you were summoned to originally… in any case, are you in that much of a hurry to get back to that world? Once you do, you know, you won’t see us again.”

“Probably not ever.” Aoiketsu agreed gravely, and a sad expression touched Hikari’s face. Slowly she nodded.

“I know.” She admitted. “That’s going to suck. A lot of people here… I don’t want to leave behind. But my family are probably worried about me, so I don’t want to keep them waiting longer than I have to.”

She sighed, running her fingers through her thick, dark hair.

“It’s not easy, being Seiryuu no Miko.” She added unnecessarily. “I feel like I’m torn between two lots of people that I care about.”

“Well, at least we can go back to Kounan together. Then we can ask Chichiri — he’ll know what to do.” Shishi suggested. Hikari nodded her head.

“He will.” She agreed. “And I want to see them and say goodbye, too.”

She smiled, though there was a bittersweet twinkle in her hazel eyes.

“I’m kinda proud of myself, though.” She added honestly. “Because for once in my life I didn’t run away, or make excuses, or anything like that. For once I did something that mattered to other people… and I don’t regret coming here just for that. I feel different about a lot of things — this world has made me change, I think, and I don’t think I’m quite so much of a hopeless person any more. Maybe I never was that hopeless to begin with — I just didn’t know it.”

“Well, you’re kinda strange, an’ you have some funny ideas sometimes.” Shishi observed. “But you’re all right. You’ll do.”

She frowned.

“Where did you say Myoume was? Since you’re up, we probably should discuss when we’re going to start heading for home. Not that

I'm in a hurry to lose you, either — but Kutou is messed up an' weird and the longer we're here, the more likely it will be you'll get mobbed an' stripped for souvenirs or something."

"Ugh, don't even say it." Hikari shivered. "As for Myoume… she's gone to see Hyoushin-san. She did help take care of him a lot when we were in Kounan, after all."

"The Commander's still sleeping, though." Aoiketsu objected. "The doctor didn't think he'd wake for a while… she's wasting her time."

"Maybe." Hikari looked pensive. "But she likes to see things through. I suppose she wanted to make sure for herself how he was. Then she can at least tell Chichiri, when we go home to Kounan."

"Hiki…" Shishi started, gazing at her friend in surprise, and Hikari blushed, her hand flying to her mouth.

"I just said 'home', didn't I?" She murmured. "How weird. Kounan's not my home… I guess it's just started to feel like it was, that's all."

"As for goin' back, I heard someone say somethin' about Miramu bein' cremated this afternoon." Maichu remarked. "So we won't be leavin' before tomorrow. Myoume's takin' his ashes back to Sairou, ain't she? Or some such thing as that."

"Yes." Hikari agreed. "And I want to speak to the Emperor too, before we go. I want to ask him to not be suspicious of Reizeitei-sama and Kounan any more… that they can be friends and then people will be happier. Reizeitei-sama would want me to, and if I'm Seiryuu no Miko, he might take notice of me."

"I think he already has that message, but it won't hurt you to tell him too." Aoiketsu agreed. "For the time being, though, you still look tired. If you're not going to rest, at least let's find somewhere to sit — all right?"

"All right." Hikari looked surprised, but she nodded her head. "If you want."

"Why don't you take Hikari to meet your Ma, Aoi?" Maichu eyed his friend keenly, and a faint red colour touched Aoiketsu's features. "Shishi an' me, we'll stick around here an' she can give me a rundown of the bandit code… but you oughta at least introduce the two of 'em, before we ride from here. Even if one of them is pushin' up daisies an' the other about to skip dimensions — it's only right."

"You have a really shit way of phrasing things sometimes." Aoiketsu sent him a dark glare, and Maichu shrugged.

“Just a thought.” He said flippantly. “Don’t need to bite my head off.”

“It’s all right with me.” Hikari added. “I mean, I know Ruiren-sama is dead, so it’s a bit weird, but… if you want me to come with you, Aoi — I… I will.”

“Really?” Aoiketsu eyed her doubtfully, and Hikari nodded her head.

“Really.” She agreed. “I can’t introduce you to my family, and yours have passed on, so I can’t meet them properly either. But at least… I can do this. Right?”

“I suppose so.” Aoiketsu shrugged. “All right. If that’s how you feel — follow me.”

Chapter 29

:important note about formatting:
People are probably already aware of FFnet's silly new rule about dividers, and have likely noticed the fact they've erased section dividers from most existing stories on FFnet. This includes all of my writing so far (which makes me cross, because I know how to section divide, and it messes up my stories beautifully).

It is far too time-consuming and difficult with the way ffnet is set up for me to go through and edit back in all the dividers for over two million words of text. I will try to do some but for the rest, I'm sorry, they will just have to be missing in action. I have tried to edit the chapters letft to post, but I can't guarantee what will show and what won't because I already use MSword's dividers and despite that FFnet has still deleted them all from my writing.

Just so people are aware that this formatting madness is not my fault — it's just one of FFnet's bright ideas :-/

Chapter Twenty Eight

"This place is sort of eerie."

As they walked between the rows of gravestones, Hikari cast a glance around her, absorbing each memorial as she did so. "All the people important to Kutou's history are buried here? Military heroes and those kinds of things? It's so close to the palace… I guess they must be pretty important. But the Emperors…"

"The Emperors aren't buried here." Aoiketsu shook his head. "Besides, in the case of the last Emperor, there wasn't anything left of him to bury."

He looked rueful.

"Shoukitei was vaporised by my father." He added. "So that was that."

"Ugh."

Hikari shivered involuntarily, drawing her cloak more tightly around her body as a sudden chill wind seemed to whip through her.

“Don’t say things like that. Even if it’s true, it’s horrible.”

“True enough.” Aoiketsu acknowledged. “But so was Shoukitei. You know… Chichiri told me that he treated my father as a toy. He used him like he used the women of his harem — even though he was just a boy, and had been stripped of his family and everything he knew. Considering that… I don’t blame the Shougun for wanting to get his own back. He had a lot of things to avenge, after all.”

“Nakago’s story is sort of sad, really.” Hikari reflected. “I’m quite glad he’s not here for me to meet — I think he was a dangerous person to come into contact with and I wouldn’t have wanted to spend time with him. But it seems like he suffered a lot — many people in Kutou seem to have a history like that.”

“No kidding.” Aoiketsu said sadly. “But maybe now it can stop. People like Hyoushin-sama’s tribe, or the remaining Hin that are scattered around in hiding. And other immigrants — people who come looking for prosperity because of Kutou’s rich and fertile land. Everyone should be able to live peacefully, now. Thanks to you, Hikari… thanks to your coming here.”

“Not just to me.” Hikari pinkened, shaking her head. “Everyone… you, Shishi, Myoume, Jin, Maichu, Hyoushin-san… Chichiri, Tasuki… everyone. I raised Seiryuu in the end, and I made the wishes. But you guys got me here… so it was everybody, in the end.”

“I suppose it was.” Aoiketsu smiled, slipping his hand into hers as he led her through the rows to the distinctive plot belonging to his mother. Carefully he knelt at the gravesite, dusting stray leaves and dirt from it as he guided his companion down beside him.

“Okaa-sama, I’ve brought a friend with me to see you today.” He said softly, resting his free hand on the top of the memorial as he spoke. “I haven’t come to ply you with questions or disturb your rest this time — I think I understand now, all the things I didn’t know before. I’m sorry, if over the years I’ve bothered you by always asking things and never saying thank you. But this time… I want to say that. You did a lot of things to make sure I was safe growing up, and that I learnt to do what was right for my country. You hoped I’d help Kutou — I know you did. And I’ve done my best, Okaa-sama. I hope you can know that, wherever you are — I’ve done my best.”

He sighed, squeezing Hikari’s fingers gently as he did so.

“And I’ve brought Hikari to meet you, too.” He added. “She’s Kutou’s Miko, Okaa-sama. Seiryuu no Miko. But I don’t want you to think of her that way. She’s Hikari… the girl I’m in love with… and I

wanted you to know her that way."

He cast Hikari a glance, and that girl blushed, shaking her head self-consciously.

"Even though you're introducing me to a gravestone, you're still making me feel nervous." She objected. "Don't be so serious about it, Aoi-kun. It's not like you're introducing me as a prospective daughter-in-law."

Aoiketsu's expression became sad, and he shook his head.

"No, I'm not." He admitted, regret in his tones. "But I wish I was, Hikari. I know you have to go back — I understand the rules and I know you don't come from here, so you can't stay. And I don't think we were wrong, deciding not to wish to Seiryuu to keep us together. Love isn't like that, after all. But I… I don't think I'll ever be able to move on from this, no matter what happens. I'll always love you, no matter where you are. And if you weren't the Miko — if you weren't… I would hope to marry you."

"*Aoi*!" Hikari's eyes widened as colour flooded her cheeks once more. "I'm fifteen! You're only eighteen… are you seriously saying you'd marry me, like this, if it wasn't for me being the Miko?"

"Yes." Aoiketsu said seriously. "I don't know what tied us together, but it did and it isn't going to be broken just by you going home. We both know that."

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

"But it can't happen, so there's no point in worrying." He added. "I just wanted you to know — if things were different, how I'd feel."

He looked at his hands ruefully.

"I said it only mattered how we felt today, since tomorrow was never guaranteed." He added softly. "But tomorrow is going to *be* today, soon. The day we're split up isn't far off, now. And I don't know how much time I have to make sure you remember me and everything we've done together. Even if it means we're parted — even if you love again, and marry, and have children in your world. I want you to remember meeting me, and the time we spent together. That's all."

Hikari swallowed hard, tears glittering on her lashes.

"Like I could ever forget." She managed. "Seiryuu bound us together, didn't he? It's a strong bond — it won't break that easily."

She reached up to dash the tears away, shaking her head

impatiently.

“And now you’ve made me cry in front of your mother.” She scolded. “I’m sorry, Ruiren-sama. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“I’m sure she doesn’t think that.” Despite himself, Aoiketsu managed a smile. “I’m sure she’d just be happy to know that her son has grown up properly, that’s all. And I’m sure she’d have liked you, too. I don’t know much about my mother — but I’m going to ask the Commander, when he’s well. I want to know, now, about the woman who gave me the Kaiga ring and chose me to be a part of Kutou’s destiny. But I think, even from the little bit I do know, that she’d have been happy to meet you. I think… she would have liked that.”

“I wish you could meet my parents.” Hikari admitted. “But there’s no way that can happen, since they can’t come here and you can’t go there. I hope they’d like you, Aoi. I think they would.”

“Even though I’m Nakago’s son?”

“I hope that they wouldn’t think too much about that.” Hikari looked thoughtful. “I don’t, after all. Tamahome and Nakago fought in a time before we were here. Hotohori-sama and Nakago did, also. All of that is a past we’re not part of… I hope they’d understand that we don’t feel the same way as they did, eighteen years or more ago.”

“Me too.” Aoiketsu hesitated, then got to his feet, hauling her up with him. “Thank you for coming here with me, Hikari. It means a lot.”

“No problem.” Hikari replied. “After all, considering how limited the time we have together is — I’m glad just to spend some of it with you now.”

“Shishi and Maichu were surprisingly tactful, realising that.” Aoiketsu commented, and Hikari laughed.

“Maichu will fit in well on that mountain, you know.” She reflected. “But you’re right. That was thoughtful of them.”

“I’ll miss Maichu and you both, when I come back here.” Aoiketsu sighed. “But life’s like that, and you move on. It’s better for him, this way. If he stayed here, he’d slowly go to pieces. He proved that last night, in the barracks, yelling at Bouri like I’ve never seen him before. Kayu’s death will bother him for a long time. Here in Kutou, everything is a reminder. In the south, it will be different. Tasuki-san won’t let him mope, and nor will Shishi. They operate on the same wavelength he does — and it’ll help him get past it and move on.”

He smiled.

“And he’s a good fighter, too.” He added. “Since Reikaku-zan’s bandits protect a lot of vulnerable people, he’ll be good at that job. Tasuki-san will probably be glad to have him, too — considering that.”

“And with Jin gone, I suppose they are one bandit down.” Hikari reflected sadly. “You’re right. It’s a good solution all round.”

She rested a hand on his arm.

“But it does leave you out in the cold rather — with your best friend staying in the South and me leaving for Tokyo.”

“I’ll manage.” Aoiketsu assured her. “Hyoushin-sama will be here, after all. And I have things to do — exams to work for, and stuff. So I’m sure it’ll be all right. At first, maybe not… but in the long term… I’ll be fine.”

He sighed, and Hikari saw the tragic expression in his seiran eyes.

“At least, I hope so.” He amended. “But in the end, I suppose, only time will tell.”

He grasped her by the hand, offering her a smile as he led her in the direction of the cemetery gate.

“We should go.” He added. “See if Myoume needs any moral support while Miramu’s ceremony is being carried out. She might, after all, and we are team-mates. We shouldn’t abandon her to face it on her own.”

“No, you’re right.” Hikari agreed. “We shouldn’t. After all, Hyoushin-san won’t be able to come.”

“Why would the Commander want to go to Miramu’s cremation, Hikari?” Aoiketsu looked non-plussed. “The guy shot him in the side with a poison dart and wrecked his sword arm… you have some funny ideas sometimes.”

“I suppose I do.” Hikari reddened, realising how close she had come to revealing Myoume’s secret. “I guess you’re right. Sorry — it must be the divine magic, it’s scrambled my brains.”

“Nothing new there, then.” Aoiketsu bantered, and Hikari put her hands on her hips, sending him an indignant glare.

“And what’s *that* meant to mean, exactly?” She demanded. Aoiketsu laughed, putting his hands on her shoulders as he met her irritated hazel eyes with teasing blue ones.

"*That's* how I want to remember you." He admitted. "Like this, when you're full of life and energy. Even in the other world, Hikari — make sure that's how you stay, all right? The Hikari I love is the one who's kind and open — the one whose feelings are always there just by looking into her eyes. I want to keep that Hikari with me, even if just a little bit. Humour me, huh?"

"Humour you?" Hikari stared at him, and Aoiketsu nodded. Slowly and gently he kissed her, slipping his arms more firmly around her body as he did so, and Hikari did not resist him, feeling the mix of happiness and sadness whirl up within her as the tears once more glittered in her gaze.

"I love you." He whispered softly, running his fingers through her hair as he did so. "I always will, until I die. Don't forget that, okay? In Kounan, we might not have a chance to talk like this — you have a lot of people to say goodbye too, after all. So I wanted to make sure I said it now. Don't forget… that you made a soldier feel this way. Enough to make him take crazy gambles, act outside his Emperor's commands and risk being branded a traitor."

"I'll remember." Hikari gazed up at him, not making any attempt to stop the tears from flowing now as she took in the gravity in her companion's unique eyes. "I couldn't ever not, you know. You were the first guy I fell in love with, after all. Even if you do come from a total other world, and even if that does suck… you don't ever forget your first love. Right? I wouldn't ever be able to forget you, even if I wanted to."

"Good." Aoiketsu touched her cheek. "Because… Hikari, Jin was unselfish. He sacrificed himself to save you knowing that by doing so, he'd never have a chance to make you love him. I'm not like that. I'm selfish. I *want* you to love me — and keep me with you."

He paused, then fumbled with his finger, removing the engraved Kaiga-ke ring and holding it out to her. Hikari gazed at him uncomprehendingly, and he smiled, indicating that she should take it.

"I don't have anything that means more to me than the Kaiga ring, because Mother gave it to me." He explained, as she hesitantly did as she was bidden, running her finger over it carefully as she did so. "And because of that, I want you to have it. Because it's something that means a lot to me."

"I can't take that!" Hikari's eyes widened and she shook her head, pushing it back towards him. "Aoi, it's the only thing Ruiren-sama left you — I can't take something so precious as a keepsake!"

"*You're* precious to me too." Aoiketsu's eyes softened, and he cupped her chin in his hands, meeting her gaze seriously.

"I won't take it back." He added. "If you throw it away, then you do. I've made up my mind — I won't let you change it."

"But… Aoi-kun…"

"Take it, keep it, and let it remind you." Aoiketsu murmured softly. "So long as you're apart from me, I want you to have it with you. It hurts to think you might find someone else — I can't pretend I want you to do that. If I could keep you, I would… and I'm not ashamed to admit it. This is the only way I have of keeping close to you."

Hikari bit her lip, eying him for a moment. Then she sighed, reaching down to pull a thread of cord from her heavy skirt as she carefully knotted it around the ring. She paused, then slipped the resultant loop over her head, clasping the ring to her chest as she did so.

"I wouldn't forget." She said slowly. "But if that's how you feel — of course I wouldn't throw it away. It's something important from someone important to me. I'll keep it safe… no matter what. Even in my world — I will. No matter what."

She smiled ruefully.

"In my world, men give women rings when they ask them to get engaged." She added. "It's ironic that you'd give me your family ring, considering what you said before."

"Really?" Aoiketsu looked surprised. Then he returned the smile. "Then that makes it even more appropriate. Even if it can't be that kind of ring for us — it conveys my feelings properly."

"Dad will freak out when I tell him a guy gave me a ring, and talked about marriage." Hikari reflected. "In my world, people don't tend to marry until their eighteen at the least. I'm three years off that… he'd throw a fit if he knew."

"Your world really is different from this one, isn't it?"

"As different as can be." Hikari nodded.

"I suppose you'll be glad to get back, then."

"Some." Hikari sighed. "I don't know what I feel about it at the moment. But I have missed my parents and the things I know. Arina. That kind of stuff. It's just… it seems surreal. When I went back there after Jin died, it seemed… not real, somehow. Like I wasn't in the

right place. But… now it's all over, maybe life really will get back to normal. Whatever that is."

"Part of me wishes I could at least see this place." Aoiketsu admitted. "But I can't."

He paused, eying her hopefully.

"But… if you ever come back to the ShijinTenchishou — to visit or whatever — you'll come see me in Kutou, right?"

"I don't think Mikos come back." Hikari looked doubtful. "I'm pretty sure it's a one way trip. That's why Mother had to have Aunt Mayo's help the last time Suzaku was summoned. She couldn't come back here herself."

"Maybe." Aoiketsu acknowledged. "But I… I suppose I want to believe that I will see you again. That this bond hasn't been generated simply because Seiryuu wanted summoning. It's too strong — I want to believe it can survive."

"I know." Hikari rested her head against his chest, uttering a heavy sigh. "But this is how it is, so we don't have a choice but to just accept it. I won't forget, though. Chichiri said memories are powerful, and I guess they are. I'm going to remember that, too… when I go back."

"In which case, there's nothing else to be said." Aoiketsu said gently. "So let's go back and find the others. Whatever happens now, after all, it'll take more than being worlds apart to fully sever Seiryuu's bond between us."

It seemed like they had been waiting forever.

Arina fidgeted against the Sukunami's settee, twisting her fingers together as she cast an apprehensive, anxious glance at her two companions. Though it was almost six o' clock and the party would be starting across town in just over an hour, it seemed a world away from the small front room and the tense, choking atmosphere as they waited for her friend's return. Inwardly she began to wish she had brought her cigarettes with her, although she knew that Taka despised the habit and that there would have been little opportunity for her to have lit one within the Sukunami home.

She let out a sigh, a faint flicker of envy stirring within her as she registered the emotion in Miaka's hazel eyes, and the strain and tension in Taka's body. If it had been her parents, she mused bitterly, they would likely not have noticed yet that she was missing. Money could not buy everything, and no matter how much of it she had

always had, Hikari had managed to have something more.

“Are you all right, Arina-chan?” Miaka asked softly at this juncture, and Arina started, blushing as she realised how much she had been spacing out. Slowly she nodded, running her fingers through her thick dark hair as she did so.

“I guess I’m worried about Hikari.” She said evenly. “She is definitely going to come back — right? This other place… this Kounan world she went to… she won’t get hurt there, will she?”

“It’s hard to say.” This time it was Taka who spoke, the concern clear in his dark eyes. “Unless you’ve been inside it, it’s hard to explain exactly what the ShijinTenchishou is like. Yes, it is a dangerous place — and as real in its own way as this one, even if the two worlds are not entirely compatible. Things can happen… bad things… but…”

He trailed off, slowly shaking his head.

“Miaka is sure her duty there is done.” He said softly. “And that she’ll come home. I want to trust a mother’s instinct, and believe that that’s the case. She’s coming home… I’m sure she is.”

“Me too.” Miaka said quietly. “She did her duty, after all. Seiryuu no Miko belongs in this world, not that one. She’ll be here. I’m sure. She’ll come.”

She shot Arina a faint smile.

“I’m glad you came.” She added. “I know you have plans this evening, Arina… and I don’t know what time Hikari might appear. But…”

“I don’t care about the party.” Arina said frankly, realising as she did so that her words were true. “I mean, if Hi-chan didn’t go, it wouldn’t be much fun in any case.”

She sighed, biting her lip, then she cast Taka a hesitant glance.

“Su… Sukunami-san?”

“Yes?” Taka shot her a quizzical look. “What’s up, Arina? You look like something else is bothering you.”

“Sort of.” Arina admitted. “I… just… you and Hikari had an argument, didn’t you? I mean… something happened, when she went into this Kounan place before. I don’t know what… but you called my place to find out if she was there, and you sounded freaked out. Hi-chan didn’t tell me what the fight was about… she said it was a

misunderstanding, because you didn't know she'd gone to the library. But I know that she'd gone to this other place, now. And there was… something else. About… about the dress… she wanted… for the… the party."

She faltered, her cheeks reddening as she dropped her gaze.

"I put her up to asking you." She whispered. "It's my fault, all of this. My fault you had that fight and she ended up in K… Kounan. Because I told her… to borrow money… from you to get it."

"Arina-chan." Miaka sounded surprised, and Arina twisted her hands together once more, nodding her head.

"I'm sorry." She murmured. "I told Hikari to… to borrow it… even if you said… no."

"Arina…" Taka's eyebrows shot up, and Arina gazed at him nervously from beneath the edges of her fringe.

"She wouldn't have been sucked into this book world place, though, if I hadn't made you mad at her." She continued awkwardly. "So if she doesn't come back safely, Sukunami-san… I… it will be… my fault. Won't it?"

Taka pursed his lips, then slowly he shook his head.

"No." He said evenly. "Hikari is old enough to know right from wrong, and to act on it, too. Whatever happened that night was between her and me… and in the end, her and Suzaku. That is something that you couldn't have known about, and which you can't blame yourself for. Most likely Hikari would have been sucked into the book one way or another — whether after a fight or not. She's Seiryuu no Miko, after all. If that was her destiny, well, there's nothing we could have done to prevent it. Any of us. She was chosen… that's all there is to it."

"Just like I was." Miaka murmured. "Taka's right, Arina-chan. But thank you for being honest with us."

She smiled.

"We're not cross with Hikari any more." She added. "But it proves you're a better friend than you think you are, wanting to own up to your part in it."

"Hikari's lucky." Arina sighed, shaking her head. "She has you both, and you care what happens to her so much. I say things, sometimes, because I'm jealous of her having that. My parents don't really care whether or not I'm around… Hikari has no idea how much

she really has."

"Perhaps none of us realise the things we have till they're not there." Taka said frankly, and Arina saw the faint glitter of tears in Miaka's hazel eyes.

Before anyone could respond to his remark, however, the house gave a tremendous judder and Arina let out a yell as the electric lights flickered wildly on and off. She grabbed hold of the settee, her heart in her mouth as she half-wondered whether Tokyo had been hit by one of Japan's not infrequent earthquakes. If so, she reasoned absently, it must have scored a big hit on the Richter scale, and her heart skipped a beat in her chest as she contemplated the threat of the aftershock.

Across the room, however, Miaka was on her feet, eyes wide with hope and disbelief.

"Hikari!" She exclaimed. "Hikari… it's her, I know… I know it is!"

"Me too." Taka reached out to grasp his wife's fingers, squeezing them tightly in his as he did so. "She's come home… and with a bang, by the sounds of it. I wonder if her room is still standing — if she came back there, maybe I should go up and look. After all, she might be hurt, or tired, or…"

"No need." Arina said softly, her eyes big as she stared in disbelief in the direction of the salon doorway. "Sukunami-san… look…!"

As one person, Taka and Miaka turned, seeing a dusty, dishevilled figure standing there watching them, tears streaming down her face as she took in her surroundings. Without a word she flung herself on her parents, hugging them tightly as she buried her head in Miaka's shoulder.

"Hikari." Miaka stroked her daughter's thick dark hair gently. "Welcome home… welcome back."

"I did it." Hikari raised a tear-blotched face to her mother's. "I raised Seiryuu and I saved that world. I did it, Mum… I…"

She trailed off, seeing Arina standing watching her with a mixture of hesitation and uncertainty, and she frowned, eying Miaka in confusion.

"*Arina…*?"

"She knows." Miaka explained gently. "She saw you disappear the last time, and I explained to her… she's been waiting for you to come home, too."

“Ari…?” Hikari’s eyes widened, and she disentangled herself from her mother’s embrace, hurrying across to grasp her friend’s hands in hers. “You… waited for me? Here? To come home?”

“Well, the party’d be pretty sh… bad if you weren’t coming.” Arina said flippantly, although she could feel the tears in her own eyes as she regarded her friend. “So I decided to come pick you up myself. No big deal.”

“Ari.” Hikari hugged her tightly, and Arina laughed.

“Hey, what’s all this?” She demanded. “You’re acting like you haven’t seen me in weeks. It was yesterday morning, you ape… why the long time no see routine?”

“I *have* been away weeks.” Hikari retorted, meeting her friend’s gaze. “In that world, I’ve been away ages. Ages and ages and ages… time moves differently there. Didn’t Mother tell you that?”

“Maybe she did.” Arina admitted. “But still… it’s sort of hard to grasp. And look at you…”

She held her friend at arm’s length, eying her critically.

“What are you dressed as?” She murmured. “You look like something from a cultural festival gone nuts. Your dress is… sheesh, people in this other world, they all dress like that?”

“Yes.” Hikari agreed, reaching down absently to brush dust from her skirt. “I had to blend in, after all. But Aidou-san made it for me… so I want to keep it. This time. This one… doesn’t have blood on it.”

She bit her lip, turning back to meet her parents’ gazes.

“I’m sorry I made you worry so much.” She said softly. “But I… I did what you did, Mum. I saved Kutou, like you saved Kounan. And I… I’m glad that I did.”

“I’m glad you did too.” Miaka assured her. “I knew you were stronger than you thought you were, musume-chan. You can do whatever you put your mind to, you know.”

“I know.” Hikari nodded her head. “I’ve learnt a lot of things from being there.”

She swallowed hard, reaching up to wipe away her tears.

“Part of me didn’t want to leave.” She admitted. “In that world, I was more useful than I’ve ever been before. But… you guys are here, and I missed you all so much. You too, Ari. I’m glad you know and I don’t have to lie to you any more. I don’t like… I don’t like lying to

people."

"Me either." Arina admitted. "And… I'm sorry too, Hi-chan. I shouldn't have tried to persuade you to take money from your parents."

"Ari…?" Hikari stared, and Arina blushed.

"I told them it was my idea." She added. "I thought it was my fault, if you got hurt in that world."

"It's not your fault. I was just stupid to listen to you." Hikari told her firmly. "But I'm not going to be so easy to persuade now, so you better get used to that."

"All right, I get the picture." Arina eyed her affectionately. "But one thing I will ask. It's Saturday night — are we going to make it to this party, or aren't we?"

"Party?" Hikari looked blank, and Arina sighed, slowly shaking her head.

"You really have been away forever, haven't you?" She asked resignedly. "The party we've been talking about for ages. Haru-kun — remember?"

"Haru…" For a moment Hikari's eyes became sad. Then, slowly, she shook her head.

"I don't really feel like going to a party." She admitted. "I'm sorry, Ari. I'm not that bothered about Haru or what he sees me wearing. In fact, I don't think… I don't think I like him that much after all."

Arina eyed her for a moment. Then she sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

"After this, I'm not sure I'm in a party mood, either." She admitted. "So what say we skip out on it? You can still come back to mine, if you like — we can still have a sleepover, and you can tell me all about this world of yours. And I want all the details. Including any hotties you met — if you forgot about Haru, you must've met a few in your time there, right?"

Hikari flushed a deep red, her hand instinctively going to something hanging around her neck, and Taka raised his eyebrow.

"Hikari?" He asked softly, and Hikari's colour deepened as she shook her head.

"It's not like that." She murmured. "I mean, there was someone… and he's someone I'm never going to forget about. But… I… we… it

wasn't anything bad, Dad. I promise. I didn't do anything you would ground me for… I swear."

Taka stared at her for a moment, then he laughed, meeting Miaka's gaze with a rueful one of his own.

"I'm glad to hear that." He reflected. "And if you girls are having a sleepover — why not stay here? Unless you have to get back to yours, Arina, you're more than welcome to stay here in Hikari's room. I think she'd like that, and we don't really want to let go of her for the whole night, now she's back where she belongs."

"Do you mind?" Hikari eyed Arina doubtfully, and Arina shook her head.

"It's a deal." She replied. "I told you. I want to know everything about this Kounan place and the people there — and I mean *everything*!"

Chapter 30

Chapter Twenty Nine

There was noone about in the village as Myoume pushed back the wooden door of the Geiyo family home, stepping out into the dusty street as she gazed pensively up at the blue sky over her head. It was a different blue, she mused absently, from the vivid, warm blue of Kounan's sky. Here in the West, the few clouds there were hung low over the horizon, and the glint of the sun gave the entire atmosphere a dry, almost brassy look.

"Until I came to leave the mountains, I didn't realise it for myself." She murmured, a sad smile touching her lips. "Four years for which I did nothing but sit and wait for Byakko to call me. But what Hyoushin said… he was right. About living, no matter how painful. I have that chance, now. I didn't know that I would, but thanks to Miramu — I have."

She glanced down at the clay casket in her hands, marked with the seal of the dragon that watched over Kutou. As she did so, memories of the four Gods dancing in the Eastern skies flickered through her thoughts, and she leant back against the wall of the house, knowing beyond all doubt that she would never look at things the same way again.

"If only Miramu could have seen how beautiful it was." She whispered. "When they joined together like that, to save this world. If he could have seen that, maybe he would have understood. That whatever Byakko did or didn't do to get him into this world — the purpose was far greater. That Mother's sacrifice, however harsh to bear, was in the name of all people."

"Myoume?"

A voice from the doorway made her turn, and her lips twitched into a faint smile as she registered the object of her thoughts watching her.

"Okaasan." She murmured. "I'm sorry — did my moving around so early wake you?"

"No… I wasn't really sleeping, and your father had to rise in any case, since he has to make a trip into Eiroku this morning." Anara shook her head. "I wondered whether you were with your brother, Myoume-chan… I thought that you might be trying to decide where

best to bury the casket."

"I don't think I'm going to bury it, even if it means there's no grave marker." Myoume said thoughtfully, glancing once more at the clay vial as she did so. "Miramu wasn't like me — he didn't confine himself. He roamed free. Always — when we were children and beyond. Even as the Shadow of the West who killed so many people. So I want to scatter his ashes, not bury them. He should be free on the wind… not trapped below the earth."

"Yes, I think you're right." Anara said softly, and Myoume saw the glitter of tears in her mother's eyes. "And then it will be over… at last my son will be at rest."

"I wish I could have saved him." Myoume said sadly. "But in the end, this was what he wanted. I think, since the day he found out how he was born, and his father's identity… since then he's been in pain. And now he isn't… now he's beyond all of that. So I'm trying not to cry about it, if I can help it. Because for him it's best."

"I lost my son a long time ago." Anara said heavily. "It's hard not to cry, but I think the tears are relief, not sorrow. This time, anyway."

She reached out to touch Myoume's hand.

"I can believe that he would protect you. The Miramu I knew always protected you." She added. "So that his death should be for that end, that makes me happy. My son was still there, inside of the assassin. Even being able to know that was more than I hoped for."

"Do you want to come with me, to scatter his ashes?" Myoume asked. "I'm sorry, I should have asked before. But I didn't want to upset you further — I know that it's been a harrowing time since the day he left."

"Your father has said to me many times how he regrets Miramu having overheard that conversation." Anara responded. "For my sake and for yours, but I think for Miramu's own. He hasn't spoken about it when you were there, but in your absence…"

She sighed.

"He was sad last night, too." She added. "That it had ended this way. He feels he drove Miramu to become that way… I'm glad that this means it will finally all be over. We can move on, then. All of us."

"Poor Father." Myoume looked thoughtful. "I suppose I didn't think about that… that it's hurt him, too."

"He asked if he could craft some kind of memorial, when we'd

decided on a final resting place." Anara nodded. "And I told him that he could. I don't blame him for Miramu's situation, Myoume — I never have. The truth shouldn't be blamed, after all. Your father fell in love with me and married me knowing my past — knowing the truth of Miramu's conception and how I had been treated before. His feelings were only ever protective towards me… I don't blame him at all."

"I don't think Miramu did, either." Myoume glanced at the casket. "Himself, his birth father… Byakko. But not my father."

"I'd like to come with you, if it's all right." Anara decided. "I think I know where you might be going, as it happens — and I hoped to talk to you, one to one, before you left again."

"Left again?" As they began making their way through the still sleeping village, Myoume cast her mother a questioning look. "You expect me to be gone that quickly, when I've only just got here?"

"Yes." Anara smiled. "I may not have seen much of you in recent years, Myoume-chan — but I can tell when you're restless and when your mind is on something else. I've also been young, too — and in love for the first time."

Her smile widened as colour flushed Myoume's cheeks.

"There. I thought so. That is what's on your mind, isn't it? Saving Kutou has brought you more than your brother's peace, in the end."

"I suppose it has." Myoume admitted. "But I didn't… I mean, I wasn't going to say anything about it. Not yet… not till Miramu was laid to rest."

"I still remember, you know, the dreams you had when you were small." Anara said reflectively. "Miramu used to tease you all the time about them, and you'd get so embarrassed you'd hide under the dining table and shout at him to go away. You were six or seven at the time, and you didn't understand why he was teasing you like he was — do you remember?"

"Yes." Despite herself Myoume smiled, nodding her head. "He thought it was so funny that I kept having a dream about some guy on a horse. But I'm surprised you've remembered so clearly… it was a long time ago, after all, and a lot has happened since."

"Man and peace were two of the first kanji I taught you, because of that." Anara added. "It'd be strange if I had forgotten that."

She eyed her companion keenly.

“Am I right to think that you finally understand the meaning of that particular dream?” She murmured softly. “I can see it in your eyes, Myoume, — something I’ve never seen there before. And as a mother it makes me happy to see it. Toroki’s eyes have always glittered with far too many things for my liking — but they’ve never made you look like this.”

“I haven’t had a vision since Miramu died.” Myoume said frankly. “I’m not sure if I ever will again, now. I don’t mind, though. I’d rather not see everything that’s going to happen, especially if it involves things I can’t change. My life has been regulated by that for far too long. Now it isn’t, and for the first time maybe I’m free to choose what to do and what happens next. It’s a little frightening — but I like it, too. I don’t have to put Toroki’s duty first, now. I am Myoume again, for real.”

“I know, and I’m glad of it.” Anara said evenly. “Will you tell me, then, about the person who’s brought that look to your face? Is he the one you saw so long ago, or was that just a flight of fancy after all?”

“No… the man *is* that man.” Myoume glanced at her hands, rubbing her fingers absently against the black fabric of her glove as she remembered the intervention she had made in the Kutou shrine. “But in some ways it almost seems like a coincidence that it’s him I’ve come to love like this. I only realised how strongly I felt when I thought I was going to lose him completely… and as yet I haven’t had a chance to speak to him face to face about any of this. He was badly wounded and when I left Kutou, he was still recovering from his injuries.”

She smiled.

“His name means Man of Peace, but he isn’t Chinese.” She added. “At least, he was born in Kutou, but he’s a tribesman — a Meihi. His Chinese name is Tou Hyoushin — but it’s his *Meihi* name that I predicted, all those years ago.”

“Tou Hyoushin.” Anara’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “A man of the Meihi tribe — from Kutou? So that is where you want to go back to, then, when your duty here is done? To the other side of the ShijinTenchishou — to the East and the country that is rebuilding itself there?”

“Yes.” Myoume admitted. “Unless you want me here, of course. In which case, I’ll stay.”

“All children must fly the nest eventually, and you flew this one four years ago.” Anara said honestly. “I will miss you either way, but I

will miss you less if I know you've gone in pursuit of your happiness this time. This man must be of good character for him to have won over such a guarded, sceptical heart as yours, my girl. If he's done that, then he must be worthy of you — and in which case, I wouldn't dream of trying to keep you here. You deserve your own life now, after all. And maybe one day a family of your own. If I stopped you from going back to this man or from telling him how you felt… I would be a poor parent indeed."

"I'm glad you feel that way." Myoume's eyes flickered with gratitude and relief. "Because it would be… hard. It's hard already, having come so far and not having been able to speak to him… I don't know, at the moment, what his condition is. He was… very ill, to be honest. Even wounded how he was, he forced himself to keep going and it's taken its toll on him as much as the initial injury. He was weak and I had to intervene to save him from death… I hope it worked and that he's managed to awaken — but the truth is, I really don't know."

Anara was silent for a moment, eying her daughter thoughtfully. Then, at length, she spoke.

"Myoume, it was *Miramu* who hurt this man, wasn't it?"

Myoume sighed, nodding her head.

"It was." She admitted reluctantly. "With one of his poison darts. We managed to find an antidote… but my brother was good at his game, and it's left its mark."

She ran her finger along the edge of the clay vial pensively, then,

"He didn't know that Hyoushin was my man of peace." She added. "Because the last thing he told me, before he… before he died was that I should find him and move on — have that life, somehow, and live it to the fullest. If he had known, it would have hurt him more, so I didn't tell him. But… in the end… Miramu might have killed him. I think now that Hyoushin *will* recover — but even so…"

"Even so, it hurts when one you love is in pain." Anara said softly, and Myoume nodded her head.

"Just that." She agreed. "Especially when you're helpless to be able to take that pain away completely."

She bit her lip.

"Hyoushin's been through many things." She added. "None of which I can talk about, because I gave him my word I wouldn't. But

that's why I so badly need to speak to him. Because I don't know how he feels — or anything like that. I don't know… and I don't like not knowing. That's why I need to go back — when Miramu's ashes are settled and prayers have been said."

"Your father and I will hope to hear from you, but we won't try and stop you from leaving Shouki-mura." Anara promised. "And you shouldn't worry so much about it. Toroki's predictions are set in stone, aren't they? I'm sure he'll hear you out."

"This prediction isn't like the others." Myoume shook her head. "I didn't see where it would lead, or anything else. Just that I would meet him, and come to trust in him. That's already true. Anything else… anything else is unknown. It's a blank slate… I don't know how it's going to end yet."

"Well, don't give up on it easily." Anara advised. "Whatever your issues, I'm sure you can face them and win. You're strong, after all — you've always been strong. Byakko asked a lot of you, and you managed to keep pace with his demands, even though you were young and even though you suffered as much as you did."

She smiled ruefully.

"This Hyoushin person will learn that you have your mother's obstinacy and your father's fortitude." She added absently. "And if he's a sensible man, he'll come to embrace it, as well."

"He's pretty stubborn himself." Myoume admitted. "So I guess… I guess we'll just see how it ends up. But if you and Father don't mind… I will go back. I will speak to him… and see. And I'll write — I'll write often, if the news is good. But I think I need to find out how that vision ends by living it, not by relying on Byakko to tell me what's going on."

At that point they reached the edge of the village, crossing the dry, yellow-tinged grassland towards the cluster of trees among whose branches Myoume and Miramu had spent much of their time playing as children. For a moment Myoume gazed up at them, remembering the happy shouts and laughter of their innocent, infant games, and a sad smile touched her face.

"This was a place Miramu was happy." She murmured. "We always had fun, climbing the trees here. Miramu used to say he was like Byakko, prowling round the branches like a hunting cat… and even as an assassin, he still liked to be in places where people couldn't easily reach him. This is where I want to spread his ashes, Okaasan. It's the best place… it fits Miramu."

“I agree.” Anara said pensively, following her daughter’s line of sight. “I remember times when your father had to come rescue you because Miramu’d coaxed you into climbing just a branch or two too high. Yes, this is the right place for him to be.”

Myoume glanced at the casket, then she held it out.

“*You* should do it.” She said softly. “I got to say goodbye already. It’s your turn.”

Anara looked startled for a moment, then she nodded, taking it carefully from her daughter’s hands.

“Thank you.” She said quietly. “I’d like that, if you don’t mind.”

Myoume shook her head.

“I think *he’d* like it, too.” She responded. “To know that no matter what happened, or how he was born, you didn’t blame him for anything. He loved you a lot, after all — I know that. It’s right for him to know you loved him still too.”

Anara held the vial up for a moment, glancing at it as she took in the weave of Seiryuu’s dragon form across the clay.

“Blessed by a foreign God. Is this a sign of the future to come?” She wondered. Myoume shrugged.

“Why not?” She asked. “After all, in the end, they work in tandem. It doesn’t matter so much which of them we reach out to, does it? They all do the same — they protect us. And now, thanks to Seiryuu no Miko, they protect all of us.”

She frowned, glancing up briefly at the sky, and Anara sent her a quizzical look.

“Myoume-chan?”

“It’s nothing.” Myoume shook her head, offering her mother a smile. “My senses are on overdrive, that’s all. For a moment, when I mentioned her, I thought I felt the Miko’s chi. But she’s not in this world any more — she’s gone home to her own, now, and all of that is over. I guess it was just thinking about her. I was fond of Hikari — she was like a younger sister in some ways, and a good friend in others. I hope that now she’s gone home, things will work out smoothly for her in her world just as much as they will for us here.”

“I think we all have a debt owing to Seiryuu no Miko, from what you’ve said.” Anara agreed. “It’s not surprising that you’d still feel her presence, when she’s done so much to help this world.”

Carefully she loosed the lid of the casket, tipping it gently towards her hand as the fine, powdery dust began to drift over her fingers.

“Maybe because of her, too, my son is at peace.” She murmured. “Miramu-kun, if you can hear me — somewhere up there in Byakko’s ether — I want you to know that I love you, and I’m sorry that I didn’t get to make you understand that when you were here. No matter what, just like Myoume, you’re a precious part of my life and I won’t forget you. You were never a burden or a sacrifice — you were my son, and that’s all.”

She faltered, and Myoume saw the tears begin to trickle down her mother’s cheeks.

“You might have been conceived by rape, but I never associated you with that.” She whispered. “If I had, I wouldn’t have been able to raise you — or treat you the way that I did. You were Byakko’s gift to me — not a curse. His way of showing me that even in the bad times, good things could come. I still believe that… I still know my son Miramu was a good person, and that no matter what, that person still lived right up to the end. Thank you for protecting your sister, musuko-kun. And… and now, I hope… rest in peace.”

With that she tipped the vial up completely, as the remainder of the fine ash cascaded out onto the wind, blowing gently against the trees and branches before settling across the barren Sairou ground. Instinctively Myoume put her hands together in prayer.

“Thank you, Oniichan.” She murmured. “For doing so much to protect me. I’ll not forget what I promised you — I’ll live my life and do everything I can do for the both of us, I swear. Whatever Byakko asks of you, however much you have to repent — do it with a free heart and move on. I’ll see you in the next lifetime, after all — when Toroki and Amefuri are needed again.”

There was no reply but the gentle sound of the breeze through the tree branches, yet somewhere, for the briefest of instants, Myoume thought she felt her brother’s warm touch against her senses. She smiled, feeling her own tears begin to fall.

“He knows, and he heard us.” She said softly. “It’s all right, Okaasan. It really is over now… at last we can all move on.”

“I still can’t believe that you went to a whole other world.”

Arina stretched out on Hikari’s bed, resting her chin in her hands as she gazed at her friend pensively. “If it hadn’t been that your Ma

explained it to me, Hi-chan, I'd think you'd lost the plot. But you really did, didn't you? All of this stuff — it was real. There really is another world inside a book in the library… somewhere in this city."

"It's not inside the book. I mean, it's real, I'm sure of that." Hikari sighed, sinking down on the end of the duvet as she shrugged her shoulders. "When I'm here it feels a million miles away. I can hardly believe I'm back, to tell the truth. I think this is a dream, and that any minute Shishi's going to prod me with the end of her sword hilt to wake me up."

"Shishi." Arina's eyes narrowed and her brow knitted together as she processed the name. "That was what you said the time the alarm clock was talking to you. The voice that was so rude about me… wasn't it?"

"Y… yeah." Hikari looked sheepish. "I'm sorry, Ari. Shishi's kind of that way — blunt, I mean. She says it as she sees it. Still…"

She sighed.

"Shishi's the first friend I had who didn't care about how I looked or anything like that. It didn't matter whether I was pretty or dressed nicely, or any of that." She said wistfully. "I liked that. Sometimes here I feel like I have to match up to you, and it's hard. You're so pretty, after all — and I'm not."

"Really?" Arina looked surprised. "You get jealous of me?"

"All the time." Hikari agreed. "It's stupid, huh? Because we're friends. But you live in this big place, you have everyone at school listening to you — and you're much more attractive than I am. I just… it's hard to live up to that sometimes, or it seems it."

"But you have Miaka-san and Sukunami-san." Arina's expression became sad. "They care about you. My parents don't care about me at all, Hikari. They really don't mind what I do, or where I go. If they did… heck, if they even yelled at me for doing something like borrow money without asking — you have no idea how happy I'd be. But they don't acknowledge it at all. They don't even notice. They have their world… and I have mine."

"I never thought of it much that way, until I went to the ShijinTenchishou and was without my family for the first time." Hikari admitted. "That it must suck for you, having them always away."

"Yeah." Arina looked thoughtful. "I never thought to talk to you about it before, though. Guess we're pretty shit as friends go, aren't

we?"

"We've both been, somewhat." Hikari leant back against the wall, idly kicking her legs as she debated the point in her mind. "But we've got past it now, right? After all, you know my biggest secret. Going to that place… I don't feel a bit the same as before."

She sighed heavily.

"I miss it, actually." She admitted. "Or the people I met, at least."

"Speaking of which, Hikari, are you going to tell me about this hunk you picked up or what?" Arina looked interested. "He must've been something pretty special. Tell me! I want to know everything about him."

"Aoi…" Hikari bit her lip, her fingers going to the ring that hung at her throat. "I guess… I don't know even where to begin. I miss him most of everyone, I think. I thought I liked Haru-kun, Arina, but I was wrong. I didn't. I didn't really understand that properly until I met Aoi and really fell in love with him. It wasn't just a crush or something like that. He… he would have married me, if I hadn't been Seiryuu no Miko and I hadn't had to come home."

"Seriously?" Arina's eyes almost fell out of her head. "You got proposed to? No way!"

"Not exactly." Despite herself, Hikari smiled. "He just said that, if I wasn't coming back here, that he'd have liked it. It's hard to explain what he meant to me — what he means to me. It's just… I know… I'm going to miss him for a long long time. Maybe forever. I can't imagine not feeling like this about him — it's like he got right through to my soul and tattooed himself to it. Even though I'll never see him again…"

She faltered, her voice shaking slightly as her grip tightened around the ring.

"He gave me this to remember him by." She murmured. "It was a keepsake his mother left for him before she died, so it meant a lot to him. That's why… he wanted me to have it. So I couldn't forget him no matter what. And I don't want to forget him. Or anything about that world."

"He was hot, huh?"

"He was handsome, but it wasn't about that." Hikari sighed, stretching out more comfortably on the bed. "I'm not going to get away with just highlights, am I? You really want to know everything."

“Damn right I do.” Arina said firmly. “So spill. How old was he, this… Aoi, did you say?”

“Aoiketsu.” Hikari nodded. “And he was eighteen.”

“A senpai, huh? Not bad.” Arina was impressed. “And? So? What was he like? Handsome how? Tell, tell!”

“Ari…” Hikari sent her friend a playful look. “Fine. He was a soldier — he fought for Kutou, in Seiryuu’s name. His dad was a really powerful Shougun who was respected a lot in Kutou, but he got killed in a war between Kutou and Kounan. Aoi’s mother died when he was born so in the end he was raised by someone else at the Emperor’s request. His adoptive father is a really smart guy — someone who made sure he had good manners and stuff like that. And he knew a lot of things, too. Like how to plot short cuts to places, and how to read really complicated kanji. But he was also really strong with a sword. He defended my life that way several times.”

“A real knight in shining armour, huh?” Arina said enviously. “Shit, girl, why didn’t you take me with you? It sounds like the guys in this world are better than the ones we have to choose from here!”

“No. Not all of them.” Hikari admitted. “Aoi *was* special, though. I can’t explain it any other way. Just… special.”

“So this place of yours — you were in the middle of sword-fights and stuff like that?”

“Mm. More than I’d have liked.” Hikari agreed. “I can’t do anything with a weapon. But I had Aoi and Shishi to defend me. And Jin… Jin too. Before he… wasn’t there any more.”

“Jin.” Arina’s eyes narrowed. “Hey… when you came back before… your mother said someone had died, after you vanished. Was that… that guy?”

“Yes.” Hikari agreed sadly. “He was protecting me, so I still feel like it was my fault he died. He was… I never had a big brother, so I don’t know if it was like that. But it felt like it could have been. He *was* Shishi’s brother, after all — and Shishi and I… were like… sisters, in the end.”

“Shishi again.” Arina frowned. “Do you like this rude Shishi person better than me now, Hiki? I thought we were best friends — am I replaced?”

“You did it again.” Hikari murmured. “Calling me Hiki.”

“So?”

“It’s nothing.” Hikari smiled. “Maybe you and Shishi have more in common than I thought. And of course I haven’t replaced you. In this world, you’re my best friend. In that one, she is. That’s just how it is. You’ll never meet each other, in any case. And I’ll probably never see her again, either. So what are you so worried about?”

Arina was silent for a moment. Then she shrugged.

“Are you really glad to be home?” She asked softly. “Since you left behind this beau and other people — did you want to come back? You were crying your eyes out downstairs, after all. Did you not want to come back?”

Hikari pursed her lips.

“I wish I could be in both places, now.” She said honestly. “But this is my home… right? Mother and Father are here. You’re here. I was born here. It’s the place I belong. That world… there were a lot of things I didn’t know. And I learnt stuff — a lot of stuff — and people were good to me. I made a lot of friends and I fell in love. But riding horses… walking… using fire for light and all of that… I missed things from here. Electricity. Trains. Buses. Shopping malls. It’s just a different kind of world completely, I suppose. I can’t really equate the two together.”

She sighed.

“I just don’t like saying goodbye.” She added finally. “That’s the truth of it. Whatever happened, I had to say goodbye. And I hated that.”

“I guess that makes sense.” Arina flashed her a smile. “Well, I would tell you what you missed in school, except I was too busy worrying about you to pay attention, so we’ll both be cribbing notes on Monday from someone smarter than either of us. That suit you?”

“Sounds fairly normal to me.” Hikari responded resignedly. “We’ve neither of us ever hit the high grades, have we?”

“Ah, there’s more to life than being smart and passing exams.” Arina shrugged, and Hikari looked thoughtful.

“I don’t know.” She admitted. “Aoi fought for his country and he was really brave and all — but now he’s not going to do that any more. He’s giving up his sword to study for and take the government exams. He wants to be a court official and help rebuild Kutou into a peaceful, stable nation. I guess sometimes… knowing stuff is a good thing. And passing exams, too. I know Aoi will do it — he is smart, really smart, and he’s committed to Kutou. It maybe makes me want

to work a little harder to learn stuff, too. Not stuff like that, maybe — but I've never stopped and thought about what I want to be in the future."

She groaned.

"Truth is that with a brother like Makoto, I've never bothered to try." She admitted. "I'm not cut out to be academic, I know that. But I think… there must be something that I can do. Somehow… right? I didn't get chosen by Seiryuu for no reason. There must have been something he wanted to teach me… and I guess I want to find out if I learnt it while saving Kutou."

"You're going way over my head, but all right." Arina eyed her friend quizzically. "Just don't turn into one of those library-bound study bugs, okay? I'll never forgive you, if you do. No guy will ever look at you, if you take that route."

"I'm not looking for a guy." Hikari said frankly. "I have one. I don't need another."

"But he's in another world. Duh. You can't get to that world. Duh." Arina leant over to thwack her friend playfully on the head with a nearby pillow. "I know about long distance relationships, Hi-chan, but that's just ridiculous. You're home now. You're never going to see this Aoi again. No matter how much of an Adonis he was… that's it. You'll do better facing that and getting over it."

"I know." Hikari admitted. "But I don't think I'm going to. Not any time soon, anyway."

She sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

"Thank you for stopping home with me tonight, by the way. I know you were looking forward to the party."

"Well, I'd rather have gone with you, so…" Arina shrugged. "It's no big deal. Don't worry about it. A girl's night in works just as well."

She eyed her companion critically.

"Although you'd do better to at least try to clean up a little." She added. "Those clothes are odd and weirding me out. Plus your face is all smeared from crying — at least make yourself look human, huh? I don't want to wake in the night and think there's a monster in the room."

"Cruel, but probably fair." Hikari snorted. "All right. I'll go change. I was just enjoying being in my own room again, after sharing inn rooms or sleeping on forest floors. I mean, even though I did spend a

couple of nights in Kutou's palace, it's still nice to be in my own space."

She got to her feet, reaching for her hairbrush as she loosed her long, messy tail of hair, running her fingers through it as she moved towards the mirror to examine her reflection. The next moment, however, she had let out an exclamation, and Arina started, turning to stare at her in confusion.

"What's up? Did you see a spider or something?"

Slowly Hikari shook her head, turning to face her companion, a flicker of bewilderment in her hazel eyes.

"No… I just… Arina… I can't…"

She faltered, turning back to the mirror, and Arina frowned, getting to her feet and coming to stand beside her friend.

"What's eating you?" She demanded. "I know I called you scary, but your reflection surely isn't that…"

She trailed off, catching sight of her friend's appearance in the mirror, and slowly she swore under her breath, reaching out to touch it with a hesitant finger.

"What the hell?" She murmured. "Hi-chan… you… what the…?"

"I don't know." Hikari's voice shook, and she bit her lip. "I never saw… Ari, it's like… I'm looking at myself under water. Why… why can't I see myself properly? You're right there, I can see you just as you always are. So why are my features so… so blurry and faint?"

"I have no idea, but it's too creepy." Arina shivered. "Come away from it… it's probably just because you've only just come back from that world. Don't worry about it, Hi-chan. It's probably just that."

"I… I suppose so." Hikari looked uncertain. "You're… you're probably right. After all, I have done a lot of world hopping lately, and I did use a hell of a lot of magic to raise Seiryuu. He was inside of me, too — maybe that's just it. The effects haven't fully worn off yet."

"Well, mirrors can't choose what to reflect, so it has to be that." Arina said firmly. "Stop looking so scared, Hikari. In the morning, it'll be fine — you'll see. Meantime, I'll help you fix your hair if you don't want to look at it. Unless you want to go ask Miaka-san's advice?"

"No…" Hikari shook her head. "They've been so worried about me, I don't want to worry them more. I'm sure it's as you say, Ari. It's just because I just got back."

She cast another doubtful look in the direction of the mirror, then nodded.

“It has to be.” She added, as if to convince herself. “Let’s forget about it. After all, there’s still a lot of stuff I haven’t told you, and you did say you wanted to know everything.”

“So, all is well.”

Reizeitei turned from the window of his study, sending his companion a satisfied look as he did so. “I am glad to hear it, Chichiri. Kutou is no longer a threat to any of us — the man behind the schemes has been eradicated and Seiryuu no Miko was able to fulfil her duty without coming to harm. She has safely returned to her homeworld and we are able to go on with our lives in peace. I could not have asked for better — although I knew that, if the Suzaku Shichi Seishi were involved, success would be inevitable.”

“You flatter us far too much, Heika.” Chichiri said ruefully, folding his arms across his chest as he regarded the young man before him. “But as you said, all is well. And I wouldn’t be at all surprised if things improved between Kounan and Kutou in the next weeks and months ahead, also. Now that the malignant influence is removed from the Emperor’s select circle, I’m sure that Hyoushin will find a chance to speak to him on Kounan’s behalf. That man believes in peace beyond his own life — and that’s a strong tool to use when persuading a monarch like Lord Kintsusei.”

“Yes.” Reizeitei looked thoughtful. “This Hyoushin… you must tell me more of him. Aoiketsu mentioned him also, when I took him to task about his acts of spying against our lands. From his words, this Hyoushin person sounded a sane mind in a land of chaos — he is the man to whom you tended in the forest? The man who took injury at the hands of the assassin that killed Jin?”

“Yes.” Chichiri agreed. “And I think in that time we made an ally of him. I don’t think you need to be so vigilant on the Eastern border, Heika — I’m sure that before too long you’ll be able to remove the extra guards completely.”

“I will look forward to such a time.” Reizeitei said fervently. “I do not want trouble with any of our neighbours, after all.”

He frowned.

“I am sad, however, that Hikari is gone.” He admitted. “She was like Shishi and I are — the child of a Seishi — and that is a precious,

unique thing. I think Kounan will miss her — after all, she is Suzaku's Shinzahou, as well as Seiryuu's Priestess."

"I think we'll all miss her." Chichiri owned. "My daughter was in tears the night after she left, and she keeps asking when Hikari-neechan is going to come and visit. Meikyo's old enough to know what forever means — and that the legend of the Miko is fairly final when it comes to saying goodbye. But even so, she keeps asking. She was really fond of her — both Eiju and Meikyo, in fact. And I admit, I think Aidou and I were, too — it's a little strange, not having her around."

"Still, for what she did on our behalves, I am grateful." Reizeitei said evenly. "And I look forward to better relations with our sister Empire in the East."

He cast a glance across the chamber to where a gleaming sword stood propped against the wall.

"Before he left, Aoiketsu came to see me, to return the *shinken* in person." He added. "I was surprised, when I learnt that he had fought with it in my name in Kutou, as well as in Kintsusei's. That boy is not an ordinary young soldier, is he? I can tell that, even without your spiritual power, Chichiri. Perhaps it's the fact that like Hikari, Shishi and I, he is Seishi born… and therefore connected irrefutably to the stars."

"Aoiketsu is an intelligent young man born and raised with Kutou's best interests at heart." Chichiri reflected. "Maybe that's what you see in him, Boushin-kun. The same desire you have to protect the country your father died for is reflected in Aoiketsu where Kutou is concerned. Whatever Nakago's motives or aims, he died ridding Kutou of corruption. And just like you have Hotohori-sama's blood running through your veins, so Aoiketsu has the Hin Shougun's running through his. So long as he can control it, I don't think it's a bad thing. After all, Nakago's blood was Seiryuu's blood. And Seiryuu protects Kutou."

"Perhaps you're right." Reizeitei admitted.

"Either way, Heika, you should be able to begin making harem plans now." A playful glint touched Chichiri's ruby gaze, and the young Emperor blushed, holding up his hands.

"Believe me, I am in no hurry to do any such thing." He said earnestly. "Like my father before me, I have no intention of dallying with several young girls' hearts. My mother and father shared a genuine bond, and I would like to form the same with my Empress —

not simply produce sons from strangers who then vie for power and influence within my Kingdom. I know it is a duty I must face, and I will face it — but believe me, I am not glad of peace simply for that reason alone."

"Oh, I know that." Chichiri chuckled. "In that respect, yes, you are much like your father. And I confess, at times, we teased him rather as well."

"I don't mind being teased." Reizeitei admitted. "Very few people will joke with an Emperor, after all."

He smiled.

"I hope that the end of this affair won't stop you from coming occasionally to see me." He added. "I understand Tasuki's reservations, but you have no such problems… I would like to think that even though Kounan is no longer in any danger, and even though I am a grown man now, you will still come."

"As long as you want me to, I will." Chichiri agreed amiably. "I promised Hotohori-sama that I'd be here to help you and I meant it — I keep my word. But if you don't need my help so much as my company these days, that's fine too. I'll be sure to visit again, Heika… for now I need to get back to the village, but I won't forget your request."

"Good." Reizeitei looked pleased. "Then go safely, Chichiri, and convey my regards to the bandits and your family. And further, extend my welcome to Shi Maichu, also. I understood when Aoiketsu came to return the sword to me what the nature of his coming here was. That boy put a lot on the line to serve his cause and his Emperor, and such loyalty is hard to come by. I'd like him to know that he is welcome in Kounan, for as long as he chooses to stay."

"I'll tell him." Chichiri promised. "He was a little worried, I think, that if you knew he'd spied here before, you might hunt him down. I'll tell him what you said, and then he'll relax… the mountain is the best place for him to be, I think, and other than that, he seems to be happy there."

"I have no reason to chase former spies when there is no threat of war." Reizeitei said evenly. "Thank you, Chichiri. And I hope to see you again, before the summer is out."

"I'm sure you can count on that." Chichiri acknowledged, plucking the *kasa* from his head as he bowed playfully before his Emperor. "I'm sure we'll see each other again more than soon enough, Reizeitei-

sama."

With which cheeky remark he cast his spell, disappearing into his hat as he focused his magic on fixing a landing on the slopes of Reikaku-zan.

The mountain was busy, he discovered, as he emerged from his hat, and for a moment he just watched the bandits as they went about their daily tasks, extending greetings to one or two that knew him well enough to call him by name. It was business as usual, he reflected, for the union of the Gods over Kutou did not change the needs of the poorer local villagers, and secretly he was glad that, despite his brusque, impetuous manner, Tasuki had been perceptive enough to realise it.

"No matter what happens in the skies over our heads, the people still need to act for there to truly be peace." He murmured. "And thanks to Suzaku, the people in the South-West have Reikaku-zan to make sure they make it safely through to another year."

"Chichiri!" A bellow from above made him look up, a grin touching his features as he registered his Seishi companion and he raised his *kasa* in a greeting.

"Morning." He said cheerfully. "I thought I'd come and see how you were doing — and pass on Reizeitei-sama's messages, of course. He sends his best to you, you know — he'd like it if you visited more, even if you do think it's not a bandit thing to do."

"Let's not cross that bridge again." Deftly Tasuki leapt down from his ledge, dusting himself off as he eyed his friend ruefully. "So you're playing Imperial message boy today, then? Or are you just at a loose end because you no longer have Tama's brat to babysit all the time?"

"I don't know. It's strange now she's not here." Chichiri admitted. "But actually, I came to speak specifically to Maichu. Is he here, or…?"

"You're out of luck, because Kouji took him an' some of the others out to collect toll." Tasuki shook his head. "I figured if the kid's gonna survive on Reikaku-zan, the sooner he learns how a bandit operates the better. He's a good kid, that one — even if he has some skewed ideas in his head. We'll sort him out — he'll be fine. But he's old enough an' strong enough to do his duty out on the slopes… so I made sure he was picked."

"Then I'll have to wait for him to return, I suppose." Chichiri said resignedly. "Or come back later. Still, I'm glad to see you haven't

rejected him. It seems Shishi made a big promise for you in Kutou, all things considered."

"Well, I don't mind that she did. It was the right promise to make, so I ain't objectin'." Tasuki owned. "That kid ain't so much a cub any more, is she? I'm realisin' that. One day she'll make a damn fine Kashira — that is, if I'm ever stupid enough t'let anyone kick me off the mountain."

"You shouldn't give me such an easy opening to tease you, Tasuki-kun." Chichiri said, amused. "But I'll let that one go, this time."

He stretched, slipping his kasa back into travel position as he surveyed the mountain once more.

"Back to normal, huh?"

"As normal as it can be, now Jin is gone." Tasuki said evenly, and Chichiri saw a glint of regret in the bandit's bronze gaze. "But I know what Seiryuu said to Hikari and the cub in Kutou, and I have to accept that as final. I think I had, anyhow, t'be honest. I've seen enough death to know it's something you can't undo. I'm grateful to the kid for askin' for it — but I didn't expect anything to bring him back. Reincarnated — that's the best we can hope for. An' he won't be Jin, the next time — but hey, in some ways, that ain't a bad thing. Shishi doesn't realise what a shit time that boy had, before he came to the mountain. This time, with any luck, he won't have that kind of a beginning."

"He still had a lot to be thankful for, growing up with you and Anzu as surrogate parents." Chichiri said gently. "You did a lot for him, and he repaid that, in the end. He was a son you can be proud of, Tasuki — even now he's gone. And your daughter too — as you said, she's not a cub any more. Shishi's fifteen now — but it isn't an added year of age that's changed about her. Doryoku's influence, Jin's death, Hikari… all of it has made her a young adult, not just a careless kid. She's her father's daughter all right — and it suits her, too."

"If I'm lucky, she'll have a touch more sense about her than I did at that age." Tasuki reflected, and Chichiri laughed.

"Of all people, that sounds strange coming from you, you know."

"Probably." Tasuki acknowledged ruefully. "But it's still the truth. Even fifteen years on I ain't got a clue what to do with a daughter — so it's a damn good thing everythin' else seems to be workin' out in her favour."

"You didn't send her to collect toll with Maichu, then?"

“No.” Tasuki shook his head. “Kaou-zan know her by sight as mine, an’ I don’t want to make a target of her. She’s stronger, now, an’ a touch smarter — but to them she’s still a girl an’ I’d like her to have a few more years on her before she goes fightin’ on those terms. Even despite everything she’s done — it’s too close to losing Jin for me to risk her too much, I guess.”

He grimaced, looking embarrassed.

“I sound screwed up, but that’s how it is. An’ Anzu’s the same. But I won’t coddle the kid — not if I can help it. She’s proven she can make her own decisions… an’ I’ll respect that, so far as I can.”

He gestured towards the mountain.

“You gonna come inside? I guess Boushin said the usual kind of things, but you might as well tell me anyway.”

“He’s growing more and more like Hotohori-sama, but there’s still an element within him that’s all his own.” Chichiri agreed, as he allowed his friend to lead him into the core of the mountain hideout. “Like Aoi, I suppose — the child is never quite like the father. That’s probably a good thing, too — if everyone turned out like the generation before, noone would ever move on.”

“You think some deep shit sometimes, but I guess I should expect that by now, knowin’ you as long as I have.” Tasuki said resignedly, and Chichiri chuckled.

“We’re still pretty different people, you and I.” He observed. “But I suppose that’s all right, too. Raising Hisei together was a good thought, you know — her advice to Hikari was right, after all. And we work best as a team — that’s always been the case, even now there are only the two of us left.”

“More so because of it, maybe.” Tasuki said, his tones uncharacteristically thoughtful. “It’d be pretty damn shit t’be the last one standin’. I’m glad there’s the both of us. Even though Tama’s still alive, it ain’t the same. Where he is, we can’t go — so it’s not like he’s out there somewhere at all. Havin’ Hikari here made it almost like Miaka an’ Tama were back with us, although like you said, Hikari’s Hikari an’ not her parents. But at the end of the day, it’s still you an’ me lookin’ out for Kounan. Ain’t it?”

“Seems so.” Chichiri agreed. “It’s not a bad position to be in, though, is it, Tasuki-kun? I have no complaints about it.”

“Me either, I guess.” Tasuki rubbed his chin pensively. “So long as it’s me facin’ the battles, an’ not those around me. Miramu might be

dead, but it doesn't change the fact he took my son from the mountain. So long as those things don't happen — it's fine. I ain't happy buryin' those I care about, Chichiri. If Suzaku wants my life, then I'll give it — just as always, just like you would, too. But those around me…"

He trailed off, and Chichiri became grave.

"I understand, you know. Better than most." He agreed solemnly. "And I think Suzaku does, too. Hopefully, now, it won't happen any more. We might not ever stop being Tasuki and Chichiri — certainly not to each other, since our friendship was built up from that connection in the first place. But hopefully now we really do have peace all across the lands. Thanks to people like Jin — just like, eighteen years ago, it was thanks to people like Nuriko, Mitsukake, Chiriko and Hotohori-sama."

"Guess so." Tasuki said frankly. "Oh well. Time moves on, an' so do we. On to the next adventure."

"I think I can do without any more adventures for a while." Chichiri admitted. "I'm getting too old for this stuff, you know."

"Bullshit." Tasuki snorted. "You're only seven years older'n me, an' I'm no less fit than I was when we fought in the war against Kutou. Stop tryin' to fool with me — you're a long way from bein' old yet."

He frowned.

"Although livin' with my sister all this time is bound to make you feel sort of worn round the edges."

"Leave Aidou alone." Chichiri looked amused. "It's nothing to do with her. And I suppose, in a sense, I am kidding. I don't feel old — in fact, throughout this whole business, I think I've felt more like Chichiri of old, to be honest. Suzaku's blood is powerful — just like Byakko's was when Tokaki and Subaru helped us out all those years back. Even now we don't know everything about the Gods we serve, you know. And so long as that's true, there's always a reason to keep going forwards."

"Good eats an' a mug of mountain ale is as good a reason for goin' forwards as any other." Tasuki objected. "You really do think too much, sometimes. It's a bad habit o' yours, you know. Always has been."

Chichiri opened his mouth to retort, but before he could do so, something twitched across his senses and he frowned, his brows knitting together as he tried to identify the source of the sensation.

“Chichiri?” Tasuki nudged him in the arm. “You look like you’re smellin’ something funny — what gives?”

“Shh.” Chichiri held up his hand, and the bandit shot him an indignant look. “I thought I felt something… just a brush of it… but…”

He faltered, closing his good eye as he stretched out his senses to connect with the brief, flickering entity. Then, as he did so, he let out an exclamation, his eyes snapping open as he grabbed Tasuki by the arm.

“Hikari!” He exclaimed.

“Hikari?” Tasuki stared at him blankly, as if he had gone mad. “What about her? The kid’s gone home — hasn’t she?”

“Yes. Yes, she has.” Chichiri said, his earlier good mood fading as he began to piece together the possible causes of the sudden sensation. “So that being the case, I shouldn’t still be able to sense her chi. But I can — I can, Tasuki. It’s faint and wavering, but it’s there. I’m sure of it. It’s her.”

“Then she’s come back here?” Tasuki eyed him doubtfully, and Chichiri shook his head.

“No. That’s it, she hasn’t.” He said, worry in his tones. “She’s in her world. I’m sure of that. So why am I…”

He shook his head as if to clear it, frustration glittering in his ruby eyes.

“It doesn’t make any sense.” He muttered.

“I’m glad I ain’t the only one thinking that.” Tasuki said bluntly. “Put it into bandit speak for me, Chichiri — what are you sensin’ an’ what are we supposed to be doin’ about it?”

“I don’t know.” Chichiri admitted helplessly. “I can pick up something I shouldn’t be able to pick up — the aura of Suzaku no Shinzahou, when she’s not even in this world. It’s like, somehow, she’s still here. Only she isn’t — she can’t be — she went home. And she *is* home.”

He sighed, rubbing his temples.

“I need to speak to Hisei.” He said at length. “I know you and Shishi resealed the shrine, Tasuki, but humour me this once, will you? My blood and yours woke her before — I need to stir her again, so that I can ask her what the heck is going on.”

“Hisei?” Tasuki looked puzzled. “Well, it ain’t like it’s hard now we know where the door is. But are you sure? I thought all that mage shit was done with now… why do you need her opinion?”

“Because in matters of Suzaku, she’s the best source we have.” Chichiri said frankly.

“And Taikyoku-zan…?”

“The last times we went there, Taiitsukun didn’t give us full answers about anything.” Chichiri said simply. “But more to the point, Tasuki, this isn’t just to do with our world. It connects to Hikari’s world, a place where Suzaku’s power is a dangerous thing indeed. I have a worry… a small one, but it’s growing the more I think about it. And it strikes me that if anyone might know the answer to my question, it’s Hisei. Will you let me have my way? My hunches aren’t always right, but even so…”

“Ah, heck, why not.” Tasuki shrugged his shoulders. “If it means that much t’you, I guess it won’t hurt to try it. If you think this Hisei dame will stop you babbling random nonsense about this world and that world and whatever the hell else, we’ll do it. An’ there’s always Taiitsukun to fall back on, if the spirit woman can’t help.”

“Thank you.” Chichiri looked grateful. “In which case, lets go now.”

“Now?” Tasuki stared. “Right now?”

“Right now.” Chichiri agreed. “As soon as possible. I need to get to the bottom of this — and fast.”

Chapter 31

Chapter Thirty

"Suzaku no Tasuki. Suzaku no Chichiri. What is it that brings you once again to wake me from my sleep so soon?"

As the glittering form of the fire-mage took form in the stone-clawed chamber, Chichiri bit his lip, eying her quizzical, bronze eyes with a troubled ruby gaze. He bowed his head slightly towards her, holding up his hands in apology as he did so.

"I'm sorry, Hisei-sama. It's my fault." He said softly. "I'm concerned — I wanted your opinion on something that I can't settle in my mind."

"I see." Hisei's glittering eyes narrowed as she turned her head towards him, her flame-like hair flaring out in ghostly waves as she did so. "And this concern of yours relates somehow to Suzaku's power, does it? Suzaku no Shinzahou — I sense the anxiety in the blood you used to wake me. Your comrade is not so troubled, Chichiri — why is it you are?"

"It's Hikari." Chichiri admitted. "Tasuki can't sense auras the way I can, so he doesn't feel it. But I do — and I'm sure… quite sure… that it's her chi I can sense right now. It's only faint, but it's there. And it worries me that it is."

"The girl's gone back to her own world, however." Tasuki added, wrapping a strip of cloth around his still-bleeding palm as he lounged up against the wall of the chamber. "So she ain't our problem now — she's back with Taka an' Miaka, where she belongs. Chichiri's a worrier, that's the problem… he sees a million obstacles where normal people don't even see one."

"It's been my job to for a long time, you know." Chichiri sent his companion a reproachful glance. "As one of Suzaku's, that was my duty — wasn't it? Using my sorcery and my senses to detect danger? I know what I'm feeling, Tasuki, and I know it's not imagination. It's Hikari… but what I don't understand is why."

"Seiryuu no Miko has gone back to her world." Hisei said softly. "The legend has ended, and as all legends must, the Miko has gone back to the place she was born. So it has always been… so it always will be. Her duty was completed when Seiryuu was raised over Kutou."

“See… I told you you were fussing over nothing.” Tasuki raised an eyebrow. “Hisei’s said it now. The girl’s gone. Seiryuu no Miko’s done her job. That’s the end of it. Ain’t it?”

“Seiryuu no Miko…” Chichiri’s brow creased as he eyed the mage thoughtfully. “Seiryuu no Miko’s duty is over. But… Hikari… she’s not *just* Seiryuu no Miko, is she? She never was. That’s why it took us so long to realise what her purpose here was in the first place. She didn’t only belong to Seiryuu. She was also Suzaku’s, too. Wasn’t she?”

“That is an incorrect use of tense, Suzaku no Chichiri.” Hisei chided gently, offering him a faint smile. “Sukunami Hikari remains Suzaku’s Shinzahou, and that is part of the problem. There is no flaw in your reasoning. Of course, Seiryuu no Miko was sent back to her world. However… Suzaku no Shinzahou… is not the same.”

“I knew it.” Chichiri pursed his lips, clenching his fists tightly as he contemplated the meaning in the mage’s words. “I *knew* it! This has to do with that… I was sure it did!”

“Someone turned over six pages at once.” Tasuki blinked. “Did I accidentally fall asleep an’ miss a bunch of stuff, or did you jus’ do that irritating thing where you have a discussion with someone without actually usin’ proper words?”

“It’s what Hisei-sama just said.” Chichiri turned to glance at him. “Hikari’s done being Seiryuu’s Miko. But she’s still our Shinzahou. Seiryuu no Miko went home… but Suzaku no Shinzahou doesn’t belong in the Miko’s world. It belongs *here*.”

“Is that what she said?” Tasuki eyed the mage warily. “Okay. Say I believe your translation — what about it? Hikari was always the Shinzahou, right? She’s always been in that world, not this one, and it’s never been an issue. Why is it one now?”

Chichiri frowned, moving across to the wall of the chamber as he absently brushed his fingers against the star-studded wall painting.

“Because to raise Seiryuu, Hikari used what Suzaku had sealed inside of her.” He said softly. “Until she came here, her Suzaku magic was dormant. Locked away where even she didn’t know about it. That’s how Suzaku himself made it, when she and Mayo returned to that world. But this time, that didn’t happen. The power of all four Shinzahou was used to raise Seiryuu and save Kutou. Three of those Shinzahou disappeared after the summoning. Suzaku no Shinzahou didn’t. Instead she left this world through means known to us… she went back to Taka and Miaka, and is now in a place where that kind of magic shouldn’t be.”

Tasuki narrowed his gaze, and Chichiri could tell he was thinking this over carefully. At length he sighed.

"If you're sayin' what I think you're sayin', this ain't gonna be one of those things we can just not tell anyone an' hope it'll go away, is it?" He asked quietly. "I may've missed the boat, but it sounds like you're implyin' she'll blow up that world, if she stays in it. An' maybe Miaka an' Tama t'boot."

"Not that extreme, I hope." Chichiri shook his head. "But you're on the right track. Suzaku's power is a dangerous weapon in untrained hands. It doesn't belong in that world in the first place — the two things are incompatible, which is why Tamahome had to sacrifice everything to become Sukunami Taka when he chose to stay with Miaka. Mikos can come to this world and cross the divide. That's why Hikari arrived here so easily. But she also had the added factor of dormant divine magic twisted through her soul. There's no separating her from that — it fused with her spirit before she was born. And now it's awake — now she's aware of it — it can't be sealed away again. At least, I imagine it can't. Not now she knows its there."

He glanced at Hisei for confirmation, and the mage slowly inclined her head.

"Again your line of thought is correct." She agreed quietly. "Suzaku no Shinzahou is not something which can be left unattended in the Miko's world."

"So what can we do about it?" Tasuki demanded. "Shit, and I thought we'd done running around all over the place tryin' to fix stuff for a while! She's in that world an' we're in this. Even if she does have Suzaku inside of her, it's not like we can go an' hoick it back here. Chichiri said it himself — the two can't be separated. So…?"

Hisei spread her hands, scattering ash on the floor around her feet as she did so.

"Suzaku no Shinzahou belongs in Kounan." She said evenly. "Sukunami Hikari was Seiryuu no Miko, but she is Seiryuu no Miko no more. Her duty is over. Therefore the path seems clear. She is Suzaku's, just as you are. Logically, therefore, her proper place is also here."

"Her proper place?" Chichiri's eyes widened in dismay. "You mean… permanently? That even though we sent Hikari home, she… she can't *stay* there?"

"That is what I'm saying, Chichiri. Yes."

“But…” Tasuki faltered, anger flickering in his bronze gaze. “Look here, stop spoutin’ shit like that at us an’ explain, will you? You’re tellin’ us that that kid has to leave her world an’ her family behind — hell, be parted from them forever, because she helped us out an’ saved the ShijinTenchishou from disaster? Because she did us a good turn, dammit, her whole life is now skewed an’ she’s gonna be parted from Tama an’ Miaka forever?”

“She is Suzaku no Shinzahou.” Hisei said simply. “Those die were cast before she was born. It was Suzaku no Miko’s decision to entrust the God’s power in something so dear to her. There isn’t anything that can be done about it now. There’s no need to get cross with me, Suzaku no Tasuki. These are not my rules. I am only explaining how it is… I am as helpless to change it as you are… especially in this form.”

“If we brought Hikari back here… somehow… and used her Suzaku power to raise you… then she wouldn’t have as much of it, would she? If we did that, would she be able to go home?” Chichiri hazarded, and Hisei sighed, shaking her head.

“You wish to keep a child with her family, and it does you credit — both of you.” She said sadly. “I share your blood, so I share that wish. But I am also Suzaku’s tool, and I must speak for him before anything else. Even if you did such a thing, Sukunami Hikari is already changed by events. Little by little, that world will reject her — and she it. Without control of her power, she could cause harm — great harm -to the structure of either world. You have seen Suzaku and Seiryuu and the destruction they wrought over the city Tokyo when Hongou Yui and Yuuki Miaka faced Nakago’s wrath. You were both there, then.”

Her expression became solemn.

“Without proper instruction, she could cause grave harm to one she loves.” She murmured. “Even death. In this world, there are people who understand magic, and the atmosphere is condusive to its existance. There are no such stop-gaps in that world. I wouldn’t like to predict what might happen, if nothing was done to stop it.”

Chichiri closed his eyes, composing himself for a moment as he fought the uncharacteristic frustration and anger that swirled within his heart.

“Tamahome will never forgive us.” He whispered. “I promised to take care of his daughter… and all I’ve done to her… is…”

“This is not your doing, Suzaku no Chichiri.” Hisei reached out a ghostly hand to touch his shoulder, and at the sensation he opened his eyes, gazing up at her hopelessly. “You feel guilt that isn’t yours. As I

said, nothing could have prevented this. It was already decided before she was born. Suzaku and Seiryuu made a pact between them, after all. You have protected that child, and done so well… you and those who surround you. But you are still guardian of Suzaku's Shinzahou — and that is a duty that is not over yet."

"Not over yet…?" Chichiri stared at her in confusion. "Hisei, even if all the things you say are true, she's in the other world. I don't know how to get there. Hikari's the only one who's managed to cross the divide this time around. I had trouble even making contact… what can Tasuki or I do about it? Your words suggest that I should somehow take Hikari under my wing — maybe even use my sorcery to help train her like I began to do before she went to Kutou. But if she's there, how can I reach out to help her? It's not possible."

"It's not*im*possible." Hisei said frankly. "But I want you to understand, both of you, that Hikari's fate is set in stone. If I found a way for you to go to her, you must know that no matter what you try to teach her in that world, it will be to no avail. The fact you can feel her chi now is proof of that. That world is already rejecting her. Little by little, it is recognising that she has changed… that she is no longer the Sukunami Hikari she was before all of this happened. And because of it… she will no longer be able to live in that world. Her life is governed by different rules now. And consequently, she can't stay there."

"Just like Tama, the first time he went." Tasuki murmured, and Hisei nodded.

"Precisely so." She agreed. "I'm sorry to be the messenger, but this is the truth of it."

Chichiri sank down on the ground before Hisei's flame, burying his head in his hands, and for a moment there was silence in the shrine as the sorcerer struggled to get to grips with what the mage had said. Then, at length, he raised his gaze to hers.

"You're telling me that there's a way to reach her, but that in reaching her we'll be tearing her away from her family." He said flatly. "More, that no matter what she or they say about it, we can't waver in that resolve. For Hikari's well-being, and for the safety of the people around her… she has to come back to the ShijinTenchishou. And even if she did — even if I worked night and day to train her to control her magic — the world she was born into won't accept her back?"

"Yes." Hisei gazed at him regretfully. "I'm sorry for it, too. That

such a task falls on one whose heart is so receptive to the needs and feelings of others. Yet it*must* be you, Chichiri — there is no other who can make the crossing successfully."

"I was afraid it might be." Chichiri bit his lip. "But I still don't see how. And I don't know how to face Tamahome and tell him… any of this. Miaka either. To take their child from them… I can't do something like that. If someone took Meikyo or Eiju from me and told me I'd never see them again…"

He faltered, aware of the tears that had begun to well in his good eye, and he shook his head, forcing them back.

"It's not something you can ask a father to do." He whispered. "*Any* father. It's just not in me to do it."

Tasuki looked thoughtful for a moment. Then he stepped forward, putting a hand on his friend's shoulder as he met Hisei's gaze straight on.

"Let *me* go." He said quietly. "I don't like the idea any more than Chichiri does. But I ain't gonna ask him to do somethin' like that… not if it's gonna upset him so much as this. An' I lost Jin, so I understand what it is we'd be askin' of Tama. I should be the one to go… it shouldn't always fall on him."

Hisei glanced from one Seishi to the other, then she smiled.

"Your camaraderie is reassuring." She reflected. "And your feelings are commendable, Tasuki — especially given your own torn emotions. But I'm afraid it's impossible. Chichiri is the only one who can do this. If he doesn't, then noone else can. And if that's the case… I can't guarantee what the outcome will be for Hikari."

"But *why*?" Tasuki demanded. "Why does it *have* to be Chichiri?"

"Because*I'm* Suzaku no Shinzahou's guardian." Chichiri said wearily. "That's why, you know. You were trusted with the relic, here on Reikaku-zan. And I had possession of the Shinzahou — Hikari's been in my charge since she came here, after all. So it has… to be me. Because of that."

"Bullshit." Tasuki snapped. "If anything, it was *Shishi* who first found her — in the land surroundin' *my* mountain. I gave her over to you, because a mountain full of bandits ain't a good place for a scared outsider to hide out. But that's all — you're readin' too much into it, as usual."

"Chichiri is right." Hisei said softly. "Aside from his situation as the

Shinzahou's appointed protector, he is also the only one with enough spiritual power to be able to reach the Miko's world. If his magic combines with the power Suzaku invested in me, it might be possible to create an opening big enough to let him through. More importantly, he has enough spiritual awareness to be able to locate the way back home. Your heart is strong, Tasuki — but your spiritual senses are not. To send you would be to strand you there — providing we could get you there in the first place. I'm sorry — it *must* be Chichiri. There is no other way."

Chichiri let out a heavy sigh, swallowing hard as he glanced from the mage to his angry, anxious friend. Then, at length, he nodded his head.

"For Hikari's sake, then." He said reluctantly. "For the sake of her and the people around her. Though I don't like what you're asking me to do — even in Suzaku's name. As a Father, I despise it… after all that girl has been through already for our sakes."

"You are just the messenger." Hisei said gently. "I am sorry, Chichiri. But as you say — for her own sake — it must be done. Hikari is a girl of strong and kind heart. If someone she cared about became hurt because of her unmanaged magic, it would torment her. And as time goes on, her changing physical state would make it untenable for her to live there any longer. She is driven by magic, now, as much as by blood and spirit. That world rejects magic… and so the two become incompatible."

Her gaze softened.

"As time moves on, she will suffer for it." She added softly. "Though it seems cruel, this is the kindest act."

Chichiri let out another sigh.

"Very well." He murmured. "There is no other choice, then. I must go. I must look Taka in the eye and tell him the thing every parent dreads. Suzaku give me strength… for Hikari's sake, I'm going to need it!"

The room was still.

For a moment, nothing moved, and Hyoushin felt like he was drifting in a sea of calm, pale colours, not quite real but not quite fantasy.

As he lay there, gazing up at the ceiling above his head, he could feel his senses slowly shifting into place and as they did so, a sharp

pain darted up his left arm. He flinched instinctively, and a second barb followed the first as too late he realised that his movement had made it worse. At his jerk, however, there was an exclamation and suddenly a shadow fell across him as anxious dark eyes gazed down towards the pillows.

"Hyoushin?" A voice said, faint and indistinct, but Hyoushin was aware enough to realise it came from the figure standing over him. "Hyoushin… can you hear me?"

"Kin… tsu… sei-sama." As Hyoushin's fogged brain finally made a connection between the speaker and the face, he murmured his visitor's name, seeing relief spring into the Emperor's gaze.

"Thank Seiryuu." He whispered. "Hyoushin… I thought you were never going to wake up."

Hyoushin closed his eyes for a moment, gathering his scattered thoughts. Then he raised his gaze once more to his companion.

"This place… is… where?" He murmured, and the Emperor sat down beside the bed, heaving a sigh as he did so.

"I'm sorry… I wanted you within easy reach of the medics." He said apologetically. "This is a chamber in the old East wing — because it was close on hand for the palace physicians to treat you. I've been worried, and your own quarters are so inaccessible… besides… I didn't want to consign you to a bunch of unsettled soldiers when you were obviously badly hurt."

Hyoushin frowned, as shards of his memory returned.

"Kikei." He murmured, and Kintsusei shook his head.

"It's all over." He said quietly, and from his tone, Hyoushin understood the implication of his friend's words. "Kutou is safe."

"So Hikari was able to be… Seiryuu no Miko after all?"

"She was."

"And Kutou is… saved?"

"Yes. At last." Kintsusei nodded. "But you've been out cold for almost a week, Hyoushin. I was starting to think… Aoiketsu told me everything that happened to you, in the South. And I was horrified… that I could have let something slip my notice. I'm sorry, my old friend. I've used you so much to do my bidding without stopping and sparing a thought for you in all of this. Your life… I've risked it time and time again for the sake of some quest Kikei had me following. It

was wrong of me."

He bit his lip, and Hyoushin saw a flicker of the contrite boy in the man's expression.

"I've treated you no better than a slave, even though I advocate freedom." He added gravely. "For this… I am ashamed."

Hyoushin's eyes narrowed, and slowly he shook his head, inching his uninjured right hand across the bedcovers to brush the Emperor's sleeve.

"You must not make that comparison, Heika." He said softly, his voice barely more than a whisper, and Kinstsusei's eyes widened at the gentle, lilting sound of the man's native accent as he spoke. "You listened to me, when I opposed you. You heard what I had to say. If you were only my master, you would have struck me down. You did not. In your eyes I have always been a person, not your property. For this reason I serve you with my life. No other."

Kintsusei hesitated for a moment. Then he smiled, shrugging his shoulders.

"Sometimes I think you would be a far better Emperor." He said absently, and Hyoushin stared, momentarily caught off guard.

"That is a silly observation." He said at length, and Kintsusei laughed.

"That's more the Hyoushin I know." He admitted, relief in his expression. "But I… I *am* sorry, Hyoushin. For taking you for granted. It was never meant to be that way — when we were soldiers together, you know that I valued you as my equal, then. I think I still do — but I never imagined I'd be crowned King of Kutou. And being an Emperor sets you apart from so much. I've wanted us to stay friends, but it's such a difficult position."

"Not at all." Hyoushin smiled faintly. "An Emperor is still a man. He still thinks. Acts. Feels. There is no difference."

He frowned.

"In this way, it is hard to speak." He added. "Will you help me sit up a little, Heika? I cannot use my left arm, so I cannot do it alone."

"Are you sure?" Kintsusei looked surprised, and Hyoushin nodded.

"Please." He agreed. "If you would."

"Then tell me if I hurt you." Gently and gingerly Kintsusei slipped his hands beneath his companion's body, helping him into a more

upright position as he folded the pillows into a more supporting role. “There. Is that better? Your breathing sounds easier — I didn’t realise your chest was causing you pain.”

“Every part of my body aches at present, but the side where Miramu’s arrow pierced is still somewhat tender.” Hyoushin admitted. “At this angle, however, I am more able to speak and breathe.”

“Then hopefully I won’t get into too much trouble with Aishi-sensei for moving you.” Kintsusei said ruefully.

“I will tell him it was my request.” Hyoushin responded. “And that my Emperor took pity on me and sought to come to my aid.”

“You have no idea how I’ve missed your rationalisation these past few days.” Kintsusei said reflectively, sitting back in his seat as he contemplated. “It seems like almost weeks, even, since Kikei told me you were dead. Sometimes I think you’re the only true friend I do have… an Emperor’s lot is a lonely one, for sure.”

“But now Kutou has peace, you can take a wife. Perhaps more than one.” Hyoushin suggested. “It will not be so lonely, then.”

“One wife. Not many.” Kintsusei shook his head. “I won’t have the situation my father had — I won’t make women suffer like my mother. But yes, it must come now, I suppose. Even so, though, it will be a political match… I think in this respect I rather envy you as well.”

“Envy me?” Hyoushin frowned. “To what end?”

“I see.” Kintsusei’s expression became teasing. “So even with all you can see and reason out, you do not realise.”

“Will you not tell me?”

“Mm.” Kintsusei paused, then, “You know that Myoume-san came to see you several times before she returned to Sairou.”

“Myoume?” Shock glittered in Hyoushin’s amethyst eyes, followed by a faint flicker of remembrance. “But..she *is*… alive? I did not dream it… she was truly there, after all…?”

“Did you think she would not be?” Kintsusei frowned, and Hyoushin bit down on his lip.

“She said she and Miramu would face each other and one of them would die.” He said. “Her accuracy being so, I didn’t expect it to be otherwise. I thought… these last days I have had flickers of dreams crossing my senses and I was sure that she had reached out to me in the shrine somehow. But her prediction…”

He faltered, shaking his head.

“To be truthful, I am not clear on what is real and what is imagination.” He admitted. “When you and I faced one another in the shrine, I was already feeling hazy and not too well. I remember Kikei attacked me, but it is all in bits and pieces from then. I thought I heard Myoume’s voice… and felt her touch my senses. But it may have been my delusion… I do not know.”

“She did use her power to save you from death.” Kintsusei agreed. “You didn’t imagine that. Whatever miracle Byakko gave her, she used it to bring you back.”

“So it was real after all.” A thoughtful look touched Hyoushin’s features. “I see. But Miramu…?”

“Miramu took his own life to prevent harm from coming to the girl.” Kintsusei said quietly. “Myoume-san took his ashes back to Sairou and her family. But she was disappointed you weren’t awake when she left. I think she wanted to speak to you. She did ask if I would object to her returning… and of course, I said it would be fine. We’re indebted to her as much as anyone, after all.”

“She would come back to Kutou, when her family are to the West?” Hyoushin was confused. “Kintsusei-sama…”

“She said before she left that she didn’t think she’d want to stay in Sairou.” Kintsusei’s gaze seemed to become keener, as he recounted the conversation. “She said she felt more drawn to stay in the Eastern lands, and I saw no reason to get in the way of it.”

Hyoushin was silent for a moment. Then he raised troubled violet eyes to his friend’s.

“If your insinuations are as I think they are, Heika, it would be better she stay in Sairou.” He said softly. “To come back here would serve no purpose for either one of us… as I’m sure you well know. I am unlike other men in many regards… and I have too many burdens of my own to deal with. Myoume has suffered plenty already. I will not have her suffer more.”

“Hyoushin…” Kintsusei hesitated, then he shook his head. “No. That’s not right, is it? Hyoushin is the name I gave you, but it isn’t the name your mother did.”

“It is my name, now.” Hyoushin assured him. “I lied to you, perhaps, when I told you I could not remember my past life… but that I recall it does not mean I wish to be given that name again.”

He sighed.

“I am not so stable as I should like to be.” He admitted. “My thoughts and memories are too vivid and I can no longer suppress them. They must be faced and dealt with, because I cannot live this half-existence any more. More, I do not want to. My mother always taught me that life was to be lived, no matter what the pain involved. So at last I mean to follow that… to deal with my history and, I hope, put it in its rightful place.”

He looked regretful.

“I have been unfair to you, also.” He acknowledged. “I served you as my Emperor, but I concealed my history and true name from you, and used my loyalty as an excuse to expect you to make all my decisions for me. I was afraid to act or think too much on my own ends — but when I was exiled, I was forced to do so. I was fortunate, finding aid in the South. My judgement I am sure has been amiss in many regards. It has upset the balance in my mind… I thought I had controlled everything and moved beyond the things I feared, but they are not gone after all. I have not yet dealt with them — I have just confined them until the time I am no longer strong enough to do so.”

He hesitated, then,

“I am so tired.” He murmured. “I did not realise how long I had been fighting.”

“I’ve never thought of you as a slave. Not once.” Kintsusei reflected. “I would rather not think of you as my subordinate, although in political and public circles that’s unavoidable. But I think you blame yourself too much for things which weren’t your fault. You had good reason to conceal your past from me — I have never tried to pry, because I have never felt it my business to do so. But if you wish to talk to me about it — I will readily listen. We *are* friends, after all. I will not let this Imperial title stop me from that.”

Hyoushin smiled faintly.

“It may yet come to that.” He admitted. “Thank you, Heika.”

“Well, if it is all I can do, I will do it gladly.” Kintsusei reflected. “You need not feel you are inconveniencing me any in that regard.”

He shrugged.

“Besides… I see the reason in your words. If you need time and space to deal with those things, so be it. I would not try and interfere. You have more than served your country… perhaps it is time you

served your own interests, too."

"Then I must ask of you… one other favour."

Hyoushin pursed his lips, then nodded, as he inwardly made up his mind.

"Kintsusei-heika, my sister Lirayi resides in the northern mountains, in the Meihi village on the slope of Koku-zan." He said softly.

"Your *sister*?" Kintsusei's eyes widened in surprise. "I didn't realise you had living family."

"I discovered by accident that she had survived." Hyoushin responded. "And I told her that… when the fighting was over… I should like to bring her to Kutou. I will keep my word to go see her, when I am well. But I should like… to be able to…"

"Bring her home? Kintsusei asked gently." To this place?"

"Yes."

"Well, I think it's high time that Kutou's position on tribal immigration was clarified." Kintsusei said ruefully. "And if she is your family, I would not reject her. You should tell her that she will be most welcome in the East, Hyoushin. Li… Rayi-san, you said?"

"Yes." Hyoushin agreed. "My sister is named" Maiden of Hope — and so she proves to be."

"Li… Ra… Yi." Kintsusei murmured, then he nodded. "Very well. It is not an easy sound to form, but I will endeavour to get it right before I meet her."

He smiled.

"And will you now tell me your *own* name, Hyoushin? The name you were born with, in the Meihi village to the North? If it is not too painful — I would like to know. If you wish for me to continue calling you Hyoushin, I shall — but I realised when you were missing that I had never known it — and that you might have died with me never having known it. I did not like that thought."

Hyoushin hesitated for a moment, as flickers of memory teased at his senses. Then, slowly, he nodded his head.

"Lilaihi." He said softly. "My name is Lilaihi, Heika. Lila is Meihi for man. Ihi is Meihi for peace. So my mother called me, when she cast the spell that named me."

"Cast the…?" Kintsusei looked blank, and despite himself,

Hyoushin smiled.

“The translation does not entirely convey the meaning.” He said simply. “In Meihi culture, the name of the child is important… it is meant to be chosen according to the lie of the land and sky at the time the baby is born. The naming ceremony is a ritual by which the mother chooses what their offspring will be called… that name is supposed to guide them, then, for the remainder of their days. The spell my mother cast was Lila Ihi. Man of Peace. My brother was Kali Ri, the Faithful Heart. And my sister, the youngest, Li Rayi — the Maiden of Hope.”

He looked rueful.

“And so, perhaps, our paths have proven.” He added. “A wiser Meihi pointed it out to me in the mountains, and he is right. I have striven to bring peace to Kutou, despite my experiences. My brother Kaliri died defending my sister’s life, loyal to her to the death. And Lirayi kept faith for so many years that somewhere in the world I was alive and would one day find her. It is a powerful spell indeed, Heika — a spell of destiny, perhaps.”

“I see.” Kintsusei pursed his lips. “It seems that there is a lot about Meihi culture I have yet to learn. I’m sorry for it, too. Your people were annihilated without any attempt to understand their ways or their language. Yet I believe a Meihi remedy saved your life — so there must be things we can indeed learn from them. From *you*. And I would like to learn more… if you are able to tell me.”

“With time, maybe I will.” Hyoushin acknowledged. “Before I left for Hokkan, I would have never broached this subject with you or anyone at all. But Rayi is alive. That changes things. I am still somewhat Meihi — I will no longer try to suppress it.”

He looked troubled.

“Which means that I must also go back to the place that name spell was cast.” He added. “And pay my respects to the parents who died trying to defend us.”

“Yes, I see.” Kintsusei’s expression became grave. “If there is anything I can do to assist you… let me know. After all, that blood is on my family’s conscience.”

“Thank you — but I don’t think there is.” Hyoushin owned. “But you owe me nothing. You gave me freedom — and that is enough. Blame does not transcend generations. You have committed no sin against the Meihi people — and will not be so regarded. Shoukitei

ordered the slaughter. It is not your wound to mend."

"Yet I'll try to mend it." Kintsusei said resolutely. "I've long since wanted to, but I was always afraid to talk to you about it. You seemed so determinedly closed off to that part of your life. Maybe I suspected you remembered more than you'd told me, but I was also scared to hear the things you might have been through. I was so young when we met — and I didn't know how to help you. So I left it to you, and didn't interfere. Still, now I have an opportunity, and I will be relying on you and your sister too, if she will come. Kutou has a lot of potential — I'm determined that from hereon in its people will be able to utilise that potential and flourish… no matter what their origins."

"Then that is all I need to hear." Hyoushin smiled. "Thank you, Heika. That will help, I think. Their best memorial, after all, is that others can live freely and benefit in the future. They would be content, my parents… that even after what happened then, Kutou is able to change now."

"And forming bonds between peoples, regardless of ethnicity, is an important lesson Kutou has to learn."

"Indeed."

"That goes for Myoume-san, too." Kintsusei continued evenly. "Since I am quite sure she *does* care about you, Hyoushin. She was very worried, and though she didn't say as much to me, I am not such a naive Emperor that I do not know the signs of a woman forming an attachment to a man. I think she will return to Kutou soon. And when she does… she will want to see you. If you mean to disappoint her — you must do so face to face."

Hyoushin was silent for a moment, digesting this. Then he frowned.

"I think that I… *wish* to see her." He admitted, startling even himself by the revelation. "So much is working up inside of me that I do not understand… all my emotions are flying freer than they have in years, and I do not know how to manage them as yet. But Myoume is someone… in whom I have begun to trust. I cannot explain how or why, only that she and I are somehow connected, and it is a bond I am not anxious to sever myself from completely."

He sighed.

"Yet I do not wish to bring harm to her, either." He owned. "If it is as you say, Heika, it poses a problem. I am not sure whether I will even retain my sanity, once I face my past. It… isn't something that she should have to worry about."

“I think you doubt her resolution.” Kintsusei reflected. “But I suppose that we will see.”

He eyed his friend keenly, and despite himself Hyoushin felt faintly uncomfortable at the sudden scrutiny.

“I almost suspect *you* of some partiality too.” He mused. “This ‘bond’ you forged in Suzaku’s country must have been impressive indeed.”

“Yes. I suppose that it was.” Hyoushin admitted. “I have never felt affection for a woman before, aside from my mother and my sister. It is strange. I am not quite able to define it.”

Kintsusei grinned.

“I don’t suppose anyone really can, where love is concerned.” He reflected, and Hyoushin’s lips thinned.

“I would not go so far as to call it that.” He said cautiously. “And I trust you haven’t said as much to her, Kintsusei-sama. If she feels anything for me, it is a matter of Toroki’s duty, or sympathy for my situation. After all…”

“Such talk is not the province of Emperors.” Kintsusei shook his head. “No. I would not interfere. Especially not in your affairs — your judgement is, yourself to the contrary, superior to mine. I would only cause trouble.”

“And here you leave me with a dilemma.” Despite himself, Hyoushin smiled. “Whether to risk disagreeing with my Emperor in pointing out his wisdom, or whether to agree with him in admitting his weakness.”

Kintsusei stared at him for a moment. Then he burst out laughing.

“That is truly the kind of thing I expect from you.” He admitted, when he had recovered himself, and Hyoushin saw the relief burning in his friend’s eyes. “But not with that look on your face, Hyoushin. You may be tired — you may feel awash with emotions and sensations and memories you can’t yet categorise. But there’s something more human in your gaze today than I’ve seen in a long time. When you faced me before, in the shrine, your expression was alive with many things — anger, betrayal, indignation. Fever mixed with cold fury. But this… is a different Hyoushin. I have so wrongly named you, in hindsight. The identity I gave you only served to make people think you were as cold as ice… even though I’ve always known there is a loyal man behind the facade, few others have dared to look.”

“That has suited me, Heika.” Hyoushin assured him. “But it suits me no more. Still, if you do not mind… I am rather attached to the identity you bestowed upon me. Hyoushin is the name that marked the beginning of my freedom. My usefulness to Kutou. I would keep it… if you have no objection.”

“Not if you don’t. It would be hard to remember to call you anything else, I think.” Kintsusei replied. “But the meaning is still harsh. You are not a cold man, after all. I don’t want people to persist in believing that you are. The court is already looking at you in a new light — the man who risked everything and faced down a traitor in order to help bring the Miko and save Kutou. When you are fit enough to rise, you will find that much of the wariness about you at court has dissipated into nothing, now they realise what I have always known about your loyalty and your steadfastness. But for you to have such a cold name… it does not suit you. Especially not if you are going to smile more often… that will serve to confuse people, if they meet you for the first time on those terms.”

“I am Tou Hyoushin. Hyoushin of the East. Just as you named me.” Hyoushin said softly. “But it does not necessarily follow that *Hyoushin* must be spelt in the way it has been till now — does it? I am a barely literate man when it comes to the complexities of Chinese writing, anyhow. I’m sure there are any number of other characters — perhaps more suitable ones than that for ‘*koori*’ — which can be read as ‘*hyou*’?”

“I suppose so.” Kintsusei acknowledged. “And I will give it some thought. You’re right… how a man’s name is scribed is how it will be interpreted. Not how it is spoken.”

He patted his friend gently on the arm.

“If you come to it, the character for peace — ‘*hei*’ — can also be read ‘*hyou.*’” He murmured. ‘I believe that would suffice… after all, haven’t you just told me that your name in Meihi means “Man of Peace’?”

“So it does.” Hyoushin agreed.

“Who knows.” Kintsusei shrugged. “Perhaps that’s what it meant all the time.”

Hyoushin looked thoughtful.

“Eighteen years ago, that foolish priest gave a small boy the family name ‘Hei’, when he chose to bring him into his household and sponsor his upbringing.” He said quietly. “That boy died before me, in

a fight for what he believed was right. I do not blame him for what happened in any regard, Heika. I am angry that I could not prevent it, but I do not blame either him or Maichu for the circumstances they found themselves in that afternoon. And I should like it very much if the 'peace' that Kikei gave him should now be transferred to my care. In that way, Kayu cannot be forgotten. And even though he lies in Southern soil, I wish to ensure that he is not. He was a boy who was misled — that is an important lesson for all of us."

"So it is." Kintsusei became grave. "I had had the same thought when I suggested it."

He pursed his lips.

"Whatever his flaws and his delusions, I believe Kikei really did see that boy as his son." He added. "Kayu's loyalty was to a man who loved him. For that, I cannot fault him. I believe that I understand — when my mother died, I was alienated and cast out of the palace central court to the soldier's barracks as an unwanted, unfavoured son. I was alone and without purpose or support, but Nakago gave me the chance to find those things. He was a hard man — cruel, perhaps, and maybe he had evil in his heart, too. But he was the Shougun who to this day I still admire and miss. And Kayu's loyalty to Kikei was much the same, in the end."

He smiled ruefully.

"I would have died if Nakago had ordered me to, no matter what the reason." He added. "It is easy to be led astray when you have noone and nothing else to cling to."

"I don't think Nakago led you astray, Kintsusei-sama." Hyoushin shook his head. "And as you said, I think Kikei genuinely was fond of Kayu. He was a bright boy, after all. He… he might have made you a finer minister than soldier, to be truthful, although his skills were well above average. Kikei would have done better putting his ambition into Kayu's development instead of looking to further his own… then maybe so much suffering might have been averted."

"I do not know whether to think Kikei an evil man or a desperate one." Kintsusei admitted.

"I never did like him, nor trust his motives." Hyoushin said slowly. "And I believe, truthfully, that he chose to betray his people and preserve his own life when Shoukitei was Emperor of this land. As a son of a victimised tribe, this is something I find hard to come to terms with. I do not believe him completely bad — but desperation can make a man beyond the realms of redemption."

“I suppose so.” Kintsusei sighed. “I wish I had seen it sooner.”

“I also.” Hyoushin acknowledged. “Despite my dislike, I overlooked him because of the fact he was tribal as I was, and one who had lost his heritage in Kutou’s ethnic cleansing. And also because he was in your trust, and so I had no right to feel otherwise. It was an error I regret… if I am truly to serve you properly, I must not be afraid to give you my honest opinion, must I?”

“Decidedly not.” Kintsusei shook his head. “As friends or in an official situation, Hyoushin. Be as rude to me as you like — I promise that from hereon I will listen most carefully to everything that you say.”

A faint hint of the young soldier boy twinkled in the Emperor’s gaze as he said this, and Hyoushin chuckled, causing his companion to start at the unfamiliar sound.

“Is something wrong?” Hyoushin eyed him quizzically, and Kintsusei gathered his wits, shaking his head.

“No.” He responded. “I just… never heard you laugh before. That’s all. In the eighteen years I’ve known you… this is a first.”

“Well, there is a thin line between laughter and tears.” Hyoushin admitted. “And I think it very likely I’ll be reintroduced to both sides of that line over the next few months. But still, I will face it. I will overcome it. And then, with luck, I will be able to laugh often. I did, you know — as a child. Before the village was destroyed. I would like to be so again… if it is possible. I can’t erase the past — or remove the taints it has left on me. But if I can come to terms with them and move on — maybe then I can live properly. And laugh more. I should truly like to be happy… now that Kutou has peace.”

“I think that’s a wish every man has.” Kintsusei said gravely. “And a good reason to allow Myoume-san to come back here for your sake, if she decides to do so. I think she will, Hyoushin. I think you underestimate her affections, and more, I think you will be a fool if you push her away. Even if the idea frightens you now… even if there are things you have suffered and things you have to face. There is no sense being alone if you do not have to be. Take it from a solitary Emperor, surrounded by ministers and nobles and nothing more. If you can share your life, you should. And if you can reach someone’s heart… and let them reach yours… don’t pull away from it. Myoume-san is a strong young woman. And determined, too. She may be enough so to manage you, Hyoushin. I think… she just might.”

Hyoushin looked rueful.

“We will see.” Was all he vouchsafed. “And you are not alone. I have no plans to leave Kutou in the long term, whatever other time I may need to settle my affairs. This is my home. This freedom is freedom you gave me. I would not abandon you so easily.”

“Even despite the way I betrayed you?”

“Kikei betrayed us both. I never believed you would act so on your own accord.” Hyoushin shook his head. “You take it on yourself too harshly, Heika.”

“As Emperor, what else should I do but take responsibility for mistakes?” Kintsusei asked softly. “No, Hyoushin, no matter how kind you are — this is somewhat my fault and I will be wiser in future. I trusted Kikei because he shielded me when I was just a boy of fifteen thrust into the position of Emperor. I have allowed that to cloud my judgement these eighteen years. I have since learnt much more — that the children he seemed to support during the war and its aftermath were simply pawns in his bigger picture… his quest for power. Several rebel leaders have connections to one or other of these children, now grown and trying to repay the Priest’s kindness. Perhaps even that boy in whose memory you chose to amend your name.”

“Kayu.” Hyoushin’s expression became shadowed, and Kintsusei nodded.

“I asked Aoiketsu to make a full report to me about the fate of Hei Kayu from Aoiketsu, before he left for the south.” He said gravely. “Since I did not think that I could ask Maichu to relive such an event for my benefit. Since you were there, I would also have your opinion of Maichu’s conduct when you are better fit to give an official report — but I wanted to shield the boy himself as much as possible from further guilt.”

He sighed.

“The truth is, I have already pardoned Maichu of his act.” He admitted. “Although I suspect it runs too deeply within him for an Imperial word to yet have any effect. You may be cross with me, Hyoushin, but I have also granted him a discharge from his duties here. An honourable one, of course, with the Emperor’s thanks and trust maintained. But he asked to be relieved of his position in Kutou’s military and without your involvement I granted his request. He and Aoiketsu have already left for Kounan with the girl Shishi and Seiryuu no Miko — but Aoiketsu will return once he has seen them safely there. Maichu… plans to stay in the South… with the bandits on Reikaku-zan.”

“I see.” Hyoushin looked thoughtful for a moment. Then he nodded.

“Yes, perhaps that is best.” He reflected. ‘The bandits of Reikaku-zan are not rogues or thieves in a traditional sense. Rather they are the protectors of the villagers living in the locale of their mountain — much of their toll goes towards the well-being of the poorer members of those villages. In such a role, I think, Maichu would thrive. Besides, their captain, the Suzaku Seishi known as “Tasuki’ is very much the same kind of man as young Maichu is. Indeed, after Kayu’s death, it appears to have been something he said that calmed the boy in some way. Returned to him his resolve… yes, I think Maichu will do very well in Kounan, under such tutelage as that. To be here would be to remind him… this way he has a chance to put the memory behind him.”

“I’m glad you approve.” Kintsusei smiled. “I don’t know much about Kounan’s bandits, but my impressions of the young girl Shishi were good. She impressed me with her courage and determination — and even her willingness to help us despite the death of her friend. You have been among them, and if you say this then I know I did the right thing. After all, Maichu has sacrificed much for Kutou’s sake. It’s time he had a chance to live for himself.”

Hyoushin paused, then,

“The same for Aoiketsu, I trust.” He murmured, and Kintsusei nodded.

“He has become quite the impressive young soldier.” He agreed. “Much the adult, no longer the boy. I saw the shadow of his father in him for the first time in the shrine when he defended you to me.”

“I am not sure that is something we should encourage in him.” Hyoushin admitted. “I believe… he would better stay as Kaiga Aoiketsu than attempt to become Gi Ayuru.”

“He’s told me that he also wishes to submit his sword and give up his position in the Imperial Guard.” Kintsusei admitted, and Hyoushin’s eyes widened in surprise.

“He has?”

“He seems to think he’s some risk to himself or others, if he should enter battle now.” Kintsusei agreed. “But the boy has another goal in mind, and one which I believe you will approve of. He wishes to take the exams and become an official, and I will do what I can to allow him the opportunity. I feel I will finally be able to push through the change in law to allow tribal people the right to sit those tests — and

now his origins are known I will do so with haste to ensure no questions can be raised about the boy's right to do so. Besides, I have no doubt in his success. Also, I am under the impression he has met and treated with Reizeitei of the south in person. More, that he has obtained the man's trust. It has made me realise, Hyoushin, how precious that boy is likely to become in the weeks and months ahead."

"I see." Understanding flickered across Hyoushin's expression, and he nodded. "You seek to use that tentative connection to build peace between the South and the East, don't you?"

"Do you disapprove?"

"As a Commander, I dislike the loss of my two most capable men." Hyoushin admitted honestly. Then he smiled. "But as a surrogate father, I wish Aoiketsu to blossom and do his best for Kutou, so my word to Kaiga Ruiren-sama is upheld. No, Heika. I do not disapprove. It will suit Aoiketsu well, to be so connected with a country I believe he has great fondness for."

"A surrogate father." Kintsusei murmured. "I have never heard you term your guardianship that way before."

"I suppose the word has never seemed appropriate before." Hyoushin responded. "But in Kounan… a lot of things changed. That is all I can say to explain it — but Aoiketsu himself has called me thus, and I do not dislike hearing it."

He smiled ruefully.

"If Kikei can be accused of softness where Kayu was concerned, I feel I must confess it as regards that young boy." He admitted. "It was the last duty Kaiga Ruiren-sama asked of me, to help her son grow to be strong enough to help Kutou. But Aoiketsu is not just her son, or Nakago's legacy. He is a skilled young man with a quicksilver mind and a lot of qualities which are all his own. And I believe the innocence and idealism with which he has always tackled everything helped me to find my place at your court. To teach him, I had to become stronger and better, so that he would strive to disarm me. To make him believe in Kutou, I had to believe in it, and everything that we were fighting to protect. And so I became your Commander, and found a position I could do well. Perhaps that is thanks to Aoiketsu, in the end… by trying to keep my word to Ruiren-sama, I became fond of the boy myself. I think, though, it took these circumstances to make me realise that fact more clearly. Not everything in my life has been duty. I have just made it out to be."

He shrugged his shoulders gingerly, mindful of his wounded arm.

“I am foolish, sometimes.” He added honestly. “But I will work at being less so from hereon in.”

His eyes narrowed.

“You intend, then, that when Aoiketsu is qualified, you will dispatch him to Kounan to sit at Reizeitei-sama’s court on your behalf?”

“If the Southern Emperor consents to it, yes.” Kintsusei agreed. “I’m sorry it will mean him being so far from court, Hyoushin — but it is too valuable an opportunity to let slip. Any and all ties to the South must be exploited at this stage.”

“Aoiketsu is as you said — not a boy but a young man, and I would not clip his wings.” Hyoushin shook his head. “He has proven that he no longer needs guidance. I think your choice will be a good one — though I advise you not to tell him of your plan until after he has achieved the qualifications he requires. After all, he will have parted from his girl in Kounan — the memory may distract him from his goal.”

“Yes. Seiryuu no Miko.” Kintsusei acknowledged. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

“There is one other connection you may find with the South, also… if you so wish to gain their trust.” Hyoushin continued. “Suzaku’s warrior Chichiri — the apothecary Ri Hou Jun. He took me in, and treated me despite who and what I was… he also treated Maichu and Aoiketsu with kindness and in the end it was his magic who brought us here to face you. He is not an aggressive man, and he is both shrewd and quick-witted. And he shares a very close understanding with the Emperor Reizeitei — so much so that when Aoiketsu’s spying was discovered, Reizeitei-sama was persuaded to take no action against him. If you wish to treat with the South on terms that Kounan’s court will respect — I would encourage Chichiri to come here and talk with you in person. He will understand, after all, the will of the Emperor who cannot make the journey himself. Chichiri is well travelled and knows much about Kutou and its culture. If he gives his blessing to a peace agreement — Kounan’s court are bound to listen.”

“Chichiri of Suzaku.” Kintsusei’s expression became thoughtful. “I will take that advice and mull over it with some seriousness. It may well be that you are right… since Myoume-san has proven an ally, I must also consider Chichiri-san to be one, too. You trust him, so I will also. I will send word to the Southern Seishi and see whether he will

heed my request for an audience. If you think he will come… I will gladly speak with him on Kutou's behalf."

"He will come." Hyoushin said with certainty. "He has a family to protect and a country to which he is tied. His interests are peace and always will be. He went all the way to Hokkan to obtain the remedy for my poisoning, Heika. If Chichiri believes in it — he will come."

"Then I will see to it forthwith." Kintsusei decided. "And see what progress we can make, between ourselves and the South."

It was raining in Tokyo as Chichiri set down in a deserted stretch of street, pausing to catch his breath as he felt the burning haze of Suzaku's divine magic slowly fade into nothing. It was the middle of the day, with most people at work or school, and the few stragglers who were abroad were bent on their own errands, none of them paying much attention to an oddly dressed, scarred stranger who had just emerged in their midst.

For a moment, a giddy, uneasy sensation washed over the sorcerer's body, and he fought to get a grip on it, remembering how disorientating and strange it had been the last time he had come to Miaka's world.

"Like hours of my life have become seconds, and each time I take a breath, my body takes the strain of a thousand more." He murmured, rubbing his temples. "When Tasuki and I were called here by Keisuke-san all those years ago, we didn't have our Suzaku power and the transition was not quite so strange. But I see, now, what Hisei meant. This world isn't conducive to magic. Even with my having complete control over my power, I'm struggling to contain it as I should. When we fought Nakago, that hardly seemed to matter — the desperation was such that I didn't even stop to think about the levels of Suzaku magic we were using. But this world is a dangerous place for anyone who does not have that same control. Hisei is right. Hikari is in danger here — and so are the people she loves."

He dusted himself down, glancing ruefully at his village attire as he realised being inconspicuous would likely be next to impossible. In this street, where there were few people, it was one thing — but as he spread his senses out to search for familiar Suzaku chi, he realised he had not landed quite as close to the Sukunami home as he had hoped.

"But it's not bad, you know. The same city, at least."

He sighed.

“However I feel about this, I have no choice.” He remembered sadly. “As a father or not, I have to protect Hikari and I will. Even if it means upsetting those who I called friends so long ago. I must find the resolve to do this, and not waver… if I’m going to convince them, I must be sure myself.”

He frowned, raising his fingers as he tried to settle on Hikari’s distinctive life force. As he did so, he registered the flaring, inconsistent spark of Suzaku’s magic dancing against it, and with a mutter of frustration he realised that the unstable nature of his target’s aura was throwing off his accuracy.

“I can’t pinpoint her.” He murmured. “My magic’s bouncing back at me because the signals she’s sending out are too erratic and too strong to be properly quantified. Think again, Chichiri. In this world, your power isn’t the same as in your own. You have to be careful what you do… you can’t risk upsetting things any further.”

He frowned, stepping slowly out into the middle of the bustling main street. All around him, people walked and neon signs glittered, and with a sudden roar a contraption that Chichiri vaguely remembered as being a ‘car’ zoomed past him, sending up spray from the many puddles that were forming around his feet. The rain was becoming heavier, but so focused was he on his task that he did not notice how sodden his clothing was becoming, or, indeed, how many odd looks were cast his way as he moved further and further into the busy area of Tokyo’s shopping district.

“If I can’t find Hikari, then I have to find Miaka.” He reasoned, glancing idly down at the glimmering surface of one of the puddles as he waited to cross the treacherous, vehicle-heavy stretch of tarmac that seemed to be Tokyo’s answer to a thoroughfare. “I should be able to do that, shouldn’t I? Tamahome’s chi has changed, somewhat, and I don’t know what I might detect if I tried to search for him. But a Suzaku Shichi Seishi must be able to find Suzaku no Miko, no matter what. That’s the best thing… Miaka will be able to tell me where Hikari is, if I can make her understand why I need to know.”

At that moment, the lights changed and the crowd of waiting pedestrians surged forward, Chichiri allowing himself to be guided by their flow as he stretched out his Suzaku wits to brush against the distinctive trace of Suzaku no Miko’s presence. As he reached the other side of the road, he locked onto what he was looking for, and he darted to one side of the street, clarifying the location in his mind.

“Not far from here.” He murmured. “I’m close. Miaka’s nearby. Well, considering everything, I didn’t do too badly, after all. Okay,

Hisei-sama. Suzaku. I'm going to do as you asked me, and hope that I'm forgiven for it in the end."

With that, he drew his hands together, casting himself back into his hat as he focused all his senses on shifting to Suzaku no Miko's location. Oblivious to the attention he had attracted with his strange behaviour and sudden disappearance, he re-emerged in front of a tall apartment building, the rain almost coming down heavily enough now to obscure the name plate from his view.

And yet he knew he had reached the right place, and he hurried forwards, pushing open the door as he made his way inside.

"Hey, ojisan, can I help you?"

A man in a maintenance uniform barred his way, and Chichiri faltered, eying the sudden intruder with a surprised, dismayed glance.

"Ojisan?" The employee raised an eyebrow. "Shit, what are you dressed as? You know, we don't let any old crackpot just walk in here without security clearance — there are kiddies livin' in this complex, and I'd not be doing my job if I didn't keep them safe."

Chichiri gazed at him blankly for a moment, inwardly realising that had Tasuki made the journey, the tessen would already have been out of its sheath and glittering with fire in response to the stranger's challenge.

"But my way isn't the same as Tasuki's." Chichiri decided with a sigh, holding up his hands in apparent surrender. "I'm sorry… I'm not here to cause trouble, you know. I'm a friend of Yuu… *Sukunami* Miaka and it's her I've come to see. It's very important, you know — and I've travelled a long way. It has to do with her daughter… Hikari."

"You're goin' to have to do better than that." The man shook his head. "You ain't even given me a name, an' dressed like God knows what… you expect me to believe a shady character just on his word?"

"Ri Hou Jun." Chichiri said frankly. "That's my name. And if you don't want me to go any further, I won't fight you — but will you please at least send a messenger to speak to Miaka-san on my behalf? If she knows my name, and that I'm here, I'm sure she'll clear this up. I won't try and go any further on my own, but the message is very important and it can't be delayed."

The man eyed his prey suspiciously for a moment, then he sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

“Fine.” He said evenly, grabbing Chichiri loosely around the arm and pulling him into his office, closing the door behind him. “Sit — even though you’re wet through, I want to keep an eye on you so I guess the chair’ll just have to suffer it. I’ll call the apartment — but if Sukunami-san doesn’t want to see you, you’re goin’ right outta here, you understand? No fights or nothin’. I don’t want to call the police but I will if I have to.”

“I’ll do as you say.” Chichiri agreed. “So long as you send a message to Miaka… that’s all I ask.”

“Hrm.” The man sent his companion another wary glance, then moved across the office to the far wall, pulling something off the wall and pressing a series of buttons on it as he put it to his ear. Chichiri watched him curiously, idly wondering what such a thing could achieve, but before he could ask the question, the man began to speak.

“Sukunami-san? This is Kajiwari. I’m sorry to disturb you, but I’ve got a man here saying he wants to speak to you. Won’t go away — says his name is Ri Hou Jun an’ he’s got an important… yes, that’s right. Ri Hou Jun.”

He paused, casting Chichiri a doubtful glance, then,

“I don’t know as you want to see him, to be honest… he’s dressed like God knows what. Somethin’ out of a cultural play, an’ he ain’t got an iota of ID on him, by the looks. Still, I told him I’d call you and let you know. What do you want me to do?”

There was another pause, then the man’s eyes glittered with surprise.

“Well, if you say so.” He said at length. “All right. Understood. I’ll do as you say. Goodbye.”

He pressed the odd plastic contraption back to the wall, eying Chichiri thoughtfully.

“Seems she does know who you are… providing Ri Hou Jun is your real name.” He said evenly. “But just to be on the safe side… I’m goin’ to stick around till she comes down here an’ sees you for herself. Can’t be too careful in the city these days… and those clothes…”

“I was working on a special project.” Chichiri said pleasantly, relief coursing through his veins as he realised that in a few moments he would see Miaka face to face. “And I haven’t had time to change. I’m sorry if I’ve bothered you, sir — it’s good of you to help me out, you know. Miaka and her family are very dear to me.”

He offered a faint smile.

“Judging strangers on appearances is a bad habit, after all.” He said pensively. “Don’t you think that’s so?”

Before Kajiwari could respond, there was a knock on the office door, and the man grunted, crossing the floor to swing it open. Beyond stood a woman of about thirty two or thirty three, thick dark hair pulled back from her face in a ponytail and her hazel eyes sparkling with hope and disbelief. At the sight of her, Chichiri was on his feet, and as their gazes met, Miaka let out an exclamation.

“*Chichiri*!” She cried, pushing past the bemused maintenance man as she flung her arms around the Seishi. “Oh, it really *is* you! You really *are* here!”

“Fraid so, you know.” Chichiri laughed, disentangling himself from her eager embrace as he held her at arm’s length, eying her pensively. “Well, you’re still just the same as ever, Miaka-chan… even given the years that have passed since the last time we met. I’m glad to see it. You look well, after all.”

“You too.” Miaka responded, her eyes sparkling. “Oh, but of all people, I can’t believe you’re here. Why are you here? I don’t understand…”

She paused, casting a glance at the nonplussed Kajiwari, then shooting him a sheepish grin.

“I’m sorry for the trouble, Kajiwari-san.” She said apologetically. “Chi… Hou Jun-san is an old friend of the family, and it’s been some time since we saw one another face to face. He lives a long way from here, and I didn’t imagine that he’d find a moment to come… so it’s a bit of a surprise.”

“Well, so long as it’s all above board and fine, Sukunami-san, I’ll leave you to it.” Kajiwari held up his hands, giving her a look which clearly meant “It’s not my business what weirdos you associate with.”

“I’m sorry for any inconvenience.” Chichiri bowed his head towards the man. “It wasn’t meant… thank you for your help.”

“Come with me, Chichiri.” Miaka gave his arm a little tug. “Up to our apartment. It’s not far. You’re soaking wet, and you shouldn’t be in those clothes any longer than you have to — especially not here. Then you can tell me why you’ve come — and everything else, too.”

Chichiri did not reply, his heart clenching at the excitement in her voice, but he allowed himself to be led from the office and up the

stairwell to the Sukunami apartment.

“I didn’t think I’d subject you to the lift, considering everything in this world must seem odd to you.” She explained, sliding her key in the door and unlocking it, pushing it back and ushering her companion inside. “I’ll go and grab something of Taka’s for you to wear — do you want to take a shower or anything? It’s really raining like hell outside, and…”

“No… I’ll be all right.” Chichiri shook his head. “But something less conspicuous to wear would be a help. At least — I’m not staying long. I’ve come for a specific purpose, and I need to speak to both you and Taka quite urgently. Since Taka’s clearly not here — I’d like it if you’d take me to wherever he is. Just as soon as I’ve changed my clothes.”

“Taka’s working.” Miaka looked surprised. “There’s only me here — and I was about to head down town to do some shopping for the evening meal. Oh!”

Her eyes lit up with hope.

“Will you be here then? Will you stay to eat with us? My cooking has improved a lot, you know, from when I was in the ShijinTenchishou, and I’d like to know what you think.”

“I hope I won’t be here that long.” Chichiri shook his head. “Miaka, please… stop it. Stop being so happy to see me… it’s making this even more difficult.”

“Difficult?” Miaka looked startled, eying him curiously. “I don’t understand. You’re not glad to see me?”

“Very glad, but it would have been better under different circumstances.” Chichiri sighed heavily. “Never mind. Right now… I need to look less of the village apothecary and more like someone who fits into your world. At least, as much as I can.”

“Then I’ll go find you something fresh.” Miaka shrugged. “I’ll not be a moment. Just wait there.”

Within a short time she had returned, as good as her word, and before long Chichiri had changed clothes, glancing down at himself as he took in the unfamiliar fabrics of Taka’s casual attire.

“This feels strange, you know.” He murmured, and Miaka laughed.

“You should see yourself.” She teased. “You look totally unlike Chichiri, dressed that way. I’ll really have to call you Hou Jun, at this rate.”

She held out a mirror, but Chichiri shook his head, pushing it away.

“No good.” He said frankly. “Or have you forgotten that people from my world don’t reflect in your world? We don’t exist here, remember?”

“Oh, yes.” Miaka sighed, setting down the mirror. “I had forgotten. It’s a shame, though. It’d be nice for you to see yourself.”

“Can we go see Taka, then, now I’m changed?”

“Why so much of a hurry?” Miaka sat down, gesturing for her companion to follow suit, and after a moment of hesitation, Chichiri reluctantly did as he was bidden. “I haven’t seen you in such a long time — it must be almost twenty years — and you want to hurry off right away? Besides, I’ve had no chance to thank you for taking care of Hikari when she crossed over into the ShijinTenchishou. I know it’s thanks to you and Tasuki that she got through it all right and came back safely… we’re grateful to you both.”

Chichiri closed his eyes, feeling the unfamiliar sensation of tears well up once more, and Miaka let out an exclamation of surprise, hurrying over to take his hand in hers.

“Chi… Chiri?”

“Don’t say those things.” Chichiri’s eyes opened, and he met his companion’s gaze with a clouded, hopeless one of his own. “Not until you know why I’ve come here. You may not want to speak to me, let alone thank me, when you know why I’ve come. I’m sorry, Miaka. I don’t want to be here on this errand. But I have no choice.”

“Now you’re scaring me.” Miaka’s eyes became grave. “And… you’re crying? Chichiri…”

She reached up to brush away the tears that had begun to fall down the sorcerer’s cheeks, shaking her head in confusion.

“I haven’t seen you cry since you fought Hikou that last time.” She murmured. “What on earth is the matter? I’m not used to seeing you so rattled, Chichiri — what’s happened?”

Chichiri sighed, rubbing his temples as he fought to get a hold of his emotions.

“I’ve come here to see Hikari.” He said softly. “As guardian to Suzaku no Shinzahou, I have to speak to her. And to you.”

“All right.” Miaka frowned. “She’s at school, at the moment — but…”

“At school?” Chichiri’s eyes widened. “Surrounded by other people…?”

“Yes, of course.” Miaka stared at him blankly. “What about it?”

“Then we do need to see Taka and then go find her. As soon as we can.” Chichiri was on his feet. “It’s not something I can risk delaying… we have to. Please, Miaka. There must be a way to get to Taka’s place of work quickly — mustn’t there?”

“I have the car.” Miaka frowned. “For once, he took the train. So we can drive there. But I don’t understand…”

Chichiri took a deep breath.

“The magic inside of Hikari is dangerous if left un-attended.” He said quietly. “She has woken it, but she can’t control it, yet. People could get hurt, so long as that’s the case.”

“Hikari…?” Miaka’s eyes became fearful, and Chichiri nodded his head.

“It’s worse even than that.” He said sadly. “Miaka-chan, back in Kounan I have two beautiful children who are my whole world, so I understand all too well how horrible a thing it is that I’m about to ask of you. But even so, I have to ask it. Hikari’s magic means it’s not safe for her to stay in this world. As time goes on, it’ll reject her more and more -and someone might wind up getting hurt. You. Taka. Even Hikari herself.”

“What… are you saying?” Miaka paled, and Chichiri felt his heart clench a second time. He sighed.

“I’m saying Hikari has to go back to the ShijinTenchishou. Probably permanently.” He said sadly. “Before the magic she has inside of her causes some real damage to the people in this world.”

Chapter 32

Chapter Thirty One

The rain was streaming across the dashboard of Miaka's car as they drew into the parking lot of Taka's workplace, a heavy silence hanging over both the vehicle's occupants as Miaka carefully pulled her vehicle to a halt. She slipped on the handbrake, casting her companion a troubled glance as she took in the worry-lines crossing his brow and the unusual tension in his body. Dressing him in Taka's clothes, she reflected, had hardly made a difference to how much he stood out. And although the things he had said back at the apartment had cut straight through to her heart, she had found it impossible to be angry.

"He's suffering, doing this." She realised. "Yet he's come anyway. But… surely there must be a way around it. If we talk to Taka — I'm sure… there *must* be a way."

"This is it, huh?" Chichiri broke the silence, turning to glance out of the rain-streaked window as she unfastened her seat belt, nodding her head.

"This is it." She agreed. "Look… Chichiri…"

She faltered, then sighed, shaking her head.

"I don't know what it is that's so wrong. Why you want to take Hikari back — why you'd say those things if they weren't true." She said softly. "But… you said you had children of your own. That you understand what kind of a wrench it is, to even imagine being parted from them. Hikari's been away for only two or three days but it's already been hard to bear. I know you know what that means… Hikari's told us about your children, and how important they'd become to her, too. If there is any other way — any other solution…"

She trailed off, and Chichiri's ruby eye became clouded as he slowly shook his head.

"I *do*understand, which makes it much worse." He agreed soberly. "I lost my family once, Miaka. You know that. And I'm asking you… and Hikari… to sacrifice a lot in order to do Suzaku's bidding. But… even though I hate that that's what I'm doing — I can't *not* do it. It's a serious problem, and I don't think there's a way around it."

He glanced at his hands.

“I spoke to Suzaku’s mage spirit, within the heart of Reikaku-zan.” He added softly. “She told me that, if I came here, I must be resolved. That Hikari’s situation is not something my magic or any of us can change. It was decided the moment she became Suzaku no Shinzahou and a part of Suzaku and Seiryuu’s pact to save Kutou. That was how it was always going to be — that Suzaku’s blood would become Seiryuu’s Miko, use her power to raise the Gods and bring peace to the four lands. But even though Seiryuu gave her her life, the balance of magic within her has changed. I’ve felt it, too. I’ve even helped her work with it — with controlling and managing the Suzaku spirit within her. When she raised the God, Shishi said that she was bathed in Suzaku’s light — that she really embraced that power in order to do her duty by the East. Because of that, my world accepted her. And if that world accepts her fully… this one… rejects her.”

He raised his gaze to Miaka’s, and at the regret in his gaze, Miaka felt her heart clench.

“I’m sorry.” He added. “It’s no longer the case that Hikari can exist between the worlds. She could only do that so long as she was Seiryuu no Miko. She’s not that any more… she’s simply Suzaku no Shinzahou, now. And Suzaku no Shinzahou belongs in the other world.”

Miaka buried her head in her hands.

“Then this is… my fault?” She whispered. “Because I made her the Shinzahou, I’ve…”

“It’s not your fault.” Chichiri reached out a gentle hand to touch her shoulder. “It’s just how things are. We should all know by now that the Gods use us as tools in their plans, whatever those plans are. We can’t premeditate their actions, because most of them were set into motion before we were even born. This is Suzaku’s will. It’s beyond anything mere Seishi or Miko can do.”

“Former Miko, in my case.” Miaka said bitterly. “Doesn’t Suzaku *care* that this is Hikari’s home? That this is where she was born? Where her friends are?”

“I don’t know.” Chichiri admitted. He sighed, turning to glance out at the rain once more.

“I had the same wondering.” He continued. “Suzaku’s always tried to do what’s best for his people, but he still lacks that human understanding at times. He’s immortal, so life and death has no impact on him. And he’s never been a father or a mother, so he can’t understand what that bond is like. At least, that’s how it seems to me. I couldn’t give up Meikyo or Eiju, Miaka. I would do anything in my

power to keep them safe and with me, at least until they're grown enough to branch out for themselves. But just understanding your feelings doesn't change the situation. The truth is, so long as Hikari stays here, people will suffer. Her included. And that was the deciding factor for me. I had to come — for her sake and for yours."

Miaka took a deep, shuddery breath into her lungs, struggling to steady herself. Then she sighed.

"We need to speak to Taka." She said softly. "Even dressed like that, Chichiri — you're not exactly someone people wouldn't notice. I think… I'll go in and speak to him. I'll tell him it's an emergency, and see if I can get him outside. You wait here. I think the rain is stopping, in any case, so if you want to get out of the car I suppose that's all right — but I don't want to create any kind of a scene inside a busy workplace. It might not pay a fortune, but we need him to keep this job — if he had to go back to doing cafe and bar work, we'd be struggling a lot more for money."

She sighed.

"Tokyo's just as expensive as ever."

"It's all right, you know. I'll wait." Chichiri assured her. "I don't know my way around your world, and there are a lot of things I don't understand about it. I'm safer doing as you say… though I'd honestly be happier even in the rain than I am sitting inside this contraption."

He looked rueful.

"I know it's some kind of carriage, but the way it moves is little beyond my understanding, you know."

"All right." Miaka nodded her head, pushing open her door and stepping out as she hurried around to do the same for her companion. "Then wait… under the shelter, just over there. I'll be right back — I promise."

"Understood." Chichiri agreed. "I'll be there."

He clambered out of the car, smoothing down his unfamiliar clothing as he did so. "I am sorry about this intrusion, Miaka-chan. Tell Taka that, too. I don't mean to come here to cause trouble, you know."

"I know." Miaka sighed. "Okay. Taka and I'll see you over there in just a few moments."

With that, she hurried off across the parking lot, pushing open the door of the big building where Taka worked days in an office cubicle,

her heart in her throat as she contemplated what to tell her husband.

"That there's been an emergency with Hikari." She reflected. "Or no… that'll worry him. But it's worrying me, dammit! And Chichiri… I don't want to leave him too long. Although at least, being that it's Chichiri, he won't wander off or get himself into any kind of trouble. If it was Tasuki with him, that might be different, but… oh, this is all too too weird. After so many years, he suddenly shows up, and yet it's this."

She banged her hand down on the lift button as a sudden flash of anger and frustration washed through her body.

"It's not fair." She muttered. "Why is it *my* daughter? Why does this have to happen? Isn't it enough that I went to the ShijinTenchishou and saw so many of my friends sacrificed then? Hasn't *Hikari* been through enough already, also? Why an extra complication? What's so special about my family, Suzaku? *I don't understand!*"

At that moment, the lift reached the correct floor, and as she stepped out, she heard someone call her name.

"Miaka-san! What brings you here on a horrible day like this?" The speaker was one of Taka's colleagues, and Miaka forced a wan smile, holding her hands up in greeting.

"I've had a call from Hikari's school and we're to go there right away." She lied. "I need to speak to Taka — it's something of an emergency."

"The kid ain't hurt, is she?" The colleague looked anxious, and Miaka shook her head.

"No… not as far as I know." She said honestly. "But even so, we can't waste time."

"Then I'll go grab him for you. One moment." The colleague said, relief in his gaze. "Wait just one moment, Miaka-san — I know where he is."

With that the man disappeared, and Miaka heard him yell "Sukunami!" as he made his way across the busy, bustling office complex. A moment or two later he re-emerged, a companion in tow, and at the sight of his wife's face, Taka shot forward, grasping her by the shoulders.

"Miaka? What is it? What's happened with Hikari?" He demanded, and at the expression in his eyes, Miaka bit her lip.

"Can you come with me?" She asked softly. "Someone's here… and

something's happening… and I can't talk about it right here."

Taka's brow furrowed, and he cast his colleague a glance. The man shrugged, nodding.

"Go." He said. "We'll finish up — you've covered me enough times, and I'll make it all right with the supervisor. If your kid needs you, Sukunami, you'd better go see what it's about. All right?"

"Thanks, Suzuki." Taka looked relieved. "I appreciate it."

"Hey, we all have kids." Suzuki grinned. "Go on with you. It'll be all right."

"I have the car parked outside." Miaka took her husband firmly by the arm, leading him from the office before anyone could change his mind, and Taka shot her a concerned look, as if trying to read the emotion in her eyes.

"Now we're alone, you can tell me. What's happened to Hikari?" He asked softly. Miaka shook her head.

"Nothing, yet. It's not quite like that." She said slowly. "Taka… Taka, it's…"

She sighed, shaking her head as if to clear it.

"You'll see, when you get to the car." She said at length. "You won't believe it unless I show you, so that's the best thing. Come on. I don't want to leave things… alone… for too long."

"I don't understand, but I'll follow." Taka responded, his expression non-plussed. "But the kid isn't hurt? Nothing like that?"

"No. Not as far as I know." Miaka shook her head as they darted into a vacant lift, pressing the button for the ground floor. "As I said, it's not like that. The school didn't call me. It's not that sort of thing at all."

"What, then?" As the car reached its destination, Taka was out of it like a shot, pulling his wife with him. "Where are you parked? You've completely lost me — and I don't like it. Miaka, why won't you tell me straight up what's going…"

As he stepped out of the front entrance, he caught sight of the figure leaning idly up against the inside of the shelter, examining his sleeves as if unsure what exactly they were made of, and he stopped dead, letting out an exclamation.

"*Chichiri?*"

“Tamahome-kun.” At the sound of his voice, Chichiri glanced up, a faint smile touching his lips as he bowed his head in greeting. “It’s been a long time, hasn’t it? Although not quite so long as it’s been since I’ve seen Miaka. Still, you look well… perhaps for you it’s actually been longer than for me, you know. Time is a strange thing.”

“Chichiri.” Taka struggled to regain control of his composure, staring at the sorcerer as if he had just grown an extra head. “But what… why would you be… how are you here? In this world? What… does it mean?”

Chichiri bit his lip, casting Miaka a glance, and Miaka swallowed hard.

“He’s come… for Hikari, Taka.” She said softly, her voice wavering. “Hikari has to go back into the book. For… forever.”

“*What?*” Taka’s expression became stricken, and he grabbed Chichiri by the shoulders, meeting his gaze head on. “You’re not *serious*? That’s not why you’re here… dammit, Chichiri, hasn’t the kid done enough for you and your world already?”

“Yes, she has.” Carefully Chichiri disentangled his companion’s desperate grip, nodding his head. “And I don’t relish being here like this, Taka-kun. I really don’t. I know how it must seem to you, and I’m sorry. It’s not the way I’d have liked to have greeted old friends.”

He sighed, and Miaka was aware of tiredness in his ruby gaze.

“The situation is this.” He added. “Hikari is no longer able to stay in this world. I can’t change it. You can’t change it. It’s Suzaku’s doing and noone can reverse it — probably not even him. Hikari is Suzaku’s Shinzahou. As such, she has far too much spiritual power to remain safely in this world. At worse, it could damage the fabric of this plane of existence. Hikari might wind up hurting someone — someone close to her. She has no control over her magic… even me, with all the years I’ve trained to use and control my spiritual powers, find it more difficult to reign in and keep tabs on in this world. It’s not a magic-friendly atmosphere. There’s a very real danger that, without being able to manage her magic properly, Hikari could hurt people. Herself included.”

“But…” Taka faltered, and Chichiri spread his hands.

“You should understand better even than Miaka does, if Tamahome’s memories are still as vivid within you as they once were.” He added softly. “When Tamahome first came to this world, Taka, he did not fit. He could not belong here — he did not exist on

this plane, because he was Suzaku's Tamahome. He was a man of the ShijinTenchishou… and the rules that regulate life are different there from here. Correct?"

"Yes, but…"

"Hikari was born here, and even though before she was born she was made Shinzahou, that power was sealed within her." Chichiri continued. "Her birth in this world demanded it — that she could live here, with you. After all, at that moment, she was also designated Seiryuu no Miko, and the Miko must be a girl from this world. But now that duty is over, she is no longer that Miko. She's only Suzaku's treasure. Suzaku's Shinzahou, once active, belongs in only one place. The ShijinTenchishou — Kounan, preferably. And Hikari is it. Person or object, the rule would still be the same."

He rubbed his temples.

"The truth is, Taka, that your daughter won't exist here much longer anyway." He added sadly. "Her body is changing. She may already have begun to lose her place in this world — her shadow, her reflection — these things might already be fading away. Though people will see her — remember her — she will no longer be able to live alongside them. I should have guessed it, when she didn't come back here immediately after Seiryuu was summoned — but I was slow to recognise it when she got to Kounan, and there was noone in Kutou with her who could have realised the significance at the time. The truth is that her body has changed… and the longer she stayed here, even if I could somehow seal or control her magic, the more she would suffer. Just like Tamahome did, all those years ago."

Taka's eyes narrowed.

"You've thought about this hard, haven't you?" He asked softly. "All these things — you've already thought through whether or not you could seal or train her, or whether there's another way. You've already fought our corner for us, and failed… haven't you?"

Chichiri inclined his head apologetically.

"Yes." He admitted. "I am a father too now, Taka. In my world, my children are everything to me. I don't want to take your daughter from you, either. I just have no choice."

"But… we can't just… send her away." Miaka whispered. "Can we? How could we do that to her, not knowing if we'd ever even see her again? It's too cruel… she's still so young!"

"Chichiri, there's absolutely no way around this?" Taka demanded,

and Chichiri shook his head.

“None.” He said flatly. “As you already surmised, I’ve argued it every which way already. This is something that noone can change. Not even those more powerful than me. There was a pact made a long time ago that Suzaku’s chosen would become Seiryuu’s Miko and unite the Gods, saving Kutou and bringing peace to the four lands simultaneously. This your daughter has done. To be strong enough to do this, she needed to be Suzaku’s chosen. But to do so, she also had to choose to wake Suzaku inside of her. That choice, once made, can’t be unmade. Although none of us realised the implications, Hikari chose to save Kutou of her own free will. In doing so, she became a part of that world. There’s nothing any of us can do about it.”

Taka closed his eyes briefly, and Miaka could tell that he was fighting his emotions. For a moment, noone spoke. Then, at length, he sighed.

“Emergency indeed.” He murmured. “All right. Then what do you suggest we do? The kid’s in school — do you think we should rip her out of classes and bundle her back with you right now?”

“I think… that she should be taken from school.” Chichiri said slowly. “I can sense her chi, and although I can’t place its location clearly, I can tell its erratic and potentially dangerous. I don’t want her to hurt anyone here, and I don’t think she’d forgive herself if she did, either. So the first thing is to retrieve her, yes. And then… then talk to her about it. She’s old enough to know, after all, what the situation is.”

“In which case, you think *Hikari* should decide what she wants to do?” Miaka’s eyes widened, and Chichiri offered her a faint smile.

“No matter how much damage she could cause, or how much she might suffer if I failed, I can’t force a daughter from her parents.” He said quietly. “You both know me better than to think I’d abduct her — whatever the consequences. Yes, I want it to be Hikari’s choice. I want to explain everything to her, and let her decide what it is she wants to do. This is her life, after all. Her future. And even though she is still young, she’s proven that she’s not just a kid. She needs to have the final say.”

Taka and Miaka exchanged glances, then Taka nodded.

“We’re tied.” He said helplessly. “We have no choice. If Hikari blows up the school, Miaka… if something like that happened…”

Miaka sighed, remembering the chaotic scenes that had riddled

Tokyo's busy streets on the day when Suzaku and Seiryuu had fought for control of the skies.

"I don't want people to suffer either." She admitted. "But I don't want to lose my daughter. Whatever anyone says, if I made her the Shinzahou, this is my fault. There must be something I can do… as Suzaku no Miko… somehow."

"It's not so simple." Chichiri responded. "Hikari is a far more powerful Miko than you were, Miaka-chan. Because she belonged to two Gods, not one — because of that desire of yours, for your Shinzahou to be something so precious that Suzaku's power could be manifested through it in a strong enough way to benefit all four lands. I know what you're thinking — about that fight here, with Nakago and Suboshi stalking the streets, and fire burning every corner. But you have to realise,*Hikari* is capable of doing that, too. The things that Suzaku did here, when fighting Seiryuu… your daughter has elements of that power inside of her. And that magic is awake. Even *she* doesn't know the destructive potential it has… and that's why, until a decision is made, she shouldn't be around other people."

"I'm not afraid of Suzaku." Miaka said firmly. "But we'll go and bring her home. Talk to her. And then… Chichiri, whatever happens… please… don't take her away from us right then. At least… stay here. One night. One last night. And if Hikari… if she won't go, don't try and make her. If it's to be her say…"

"You have my word that I won't take her by force." Chichiri held up his hands solemnly. "My absolute word, no matter what. And also… if that's the way you feel…"

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

"It's in Hikari's hands." He said at length. "But if it's what she wants, too — one last night here isn't too much to ask. I'll stick around, in case of trouble… if that's how she feels about it, then I won't refuse."

"Then I suppose the next step is to go to Hikari's school and find an excuse to call her out of class." Miaka sighed. "Let's go."

"Well, it doesn't look like much has changed in the weeks since I was last here."

Myoume reined in her horse, pausing to survey the familiar cluster of houses with a fond, almost nostalgic smile. "Even if this time I'm only passing through Kounan on the way somewhere else, I can't not

come through the mountains and the Eastern Village. It's almost been my first home from home since I took up residence in the cave to guard the Shinzahou… my first taste of returned freedom, perhaps. I like this place. It has a good aura."

She pressed her toes gently to the horse's side, and the beast whinnied, trotting obediently down the winding path towards the village borders. As she took in the familiar scenery, she remembered the first time she had arrived here, and a slightly sad expression touched her blue eyes.

"After Jin's death, when I brought Shishi home to the mountain, Chichiri let me stay here." She recalled. "Yet, even though the bandits' first encounter with me was to bring news such as that, they didn't challenge me today for toll on my way into Kounan. Miramu's guilt truly has died with him, and I'm glad. He… and Jin, and Kayu… and maybe even Kikei himself, somehow… they can all rest in peace, atone, if they need to, and maybe start afresh. After all, even that mad priest had reasoning behind his motives. Twisted though it might have been, it still had its roots buried deep in Kutou's ethnic divisions."

"Myoume-neesan!"

A yell caused her to halt her mount a second time, pushing her thoughts to the back of her mind as she cast a grin down at the speaker. Meikyo beamed up at her, a cluster of flowers and leaves in her small hands, and with some amusement Myoume noticed the smear of mud on the edge of the girl's skirt, realising that she had probably had quite a scramble to retrieve her prize.

"Afternoon, Mei-chan." She said warmly, dismounting her steed as she twisted the reins securely between her fingers. "You've been busy — have you been in the forest?"

"Yes." Meikyo agreed. "I went to gather some herbs for Kaa-san… and I found these blossoms, too. Aren't they pretty? I'm going to put them in water as soon as I get back."

"Aidou-san let you go by yourself?" Myoume looked surprised. "That's unusual, isn't it?"

"She needed the herbs." Meikyo shrugged her shoulders. "And Eiju-nii was already busy doing another errand for her, so I had to come. It's all right, Myoume-neesan. I promised her not to speak to any bad people, or strangers, and I haven't."

"You're speaking to me." Myoume pointed out playfully, and Meikyo giggled.

“You’re not strange, or bad.” She scolded. “Did you come all the way back from Sairou to see us?”

“In a way, maybe I did.” Myoume owned. “Do you mind?”

“No.” Meikyo shook her head. She sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

“It’s nicer when people come to visit.” She added. “Everyone’s been going away, lately. Tenshi-san’s gone back to Kutou, and Aoi-nii’s gone with him. Hikari-neechan isn’t here now, and you went back to Sairou. And Shishi and Maichu-san are always on the mountain with Uncle Wolf now, so it gets boring.”

She eyed her flowers pensively.

“I hope these are still pretty when Papa comes back.” She added. “I can get more, of course, but it’s not the same.”

“Papa?” Myoume frowned, looking confused. “Chichiri’s not in the village either?”

“No.” Meikyo shook her head, her ruby gaze clouding slightly. “He went somewhere important. Suzaku’s business, Kaa-san said… but it’s made her cross, because he’s been away a week or more now, and we’ve not heard anything from him. Kaa-san says where he’s gone isn’t somewhere close by, so I suppose that’s why — but even so, I hate him being away.”

“I’m sure you do.” Myoume pursed her lips. “Suzaku’s business, huh? I came through the mountain, and I didn’t hear anything about it there. Mind you, I didn’t see Tasuki or Shishi, but Kouji was there, and he didn’t mention any kind of spur of the moment activity.”

She shrugged.

“Oh well.” She reflected. “I suppose Suzaku’s business isn’t mine, so I shouldn’t worry about it. Do you mind me walking into the village with you, Mei-chan? The horse can get something cool to drink at the farm, and hopefully I can, too. It’s been a long ride, these past few days, and I’d like to see your mother and brother again, too.”

“Kaa-san will be happy to see you, too.” Meikyo said with certainty. “It’s very busy with Papa away.”

“Maybe I can help out, then.” Myoume suggested. “My mother and father are apothecaries, like yours — I might be able to lend a hand.”

“Will you?” Meikyo brightened. “Kaa-san is tired and it makes her cross, when she’s tired. I’m trying to help, but I only have little hands, and Eiju-nii is useless when it comes to measuring stuff or picking the

right herbs, so Kaa-san can't rely on him to do those things."

She rolled her eyes, and Myoume grinned.

"Well, I suppose he has different talents." She said affectionately. "Aidou-san has you, though, and I'm sure you're more help than you realise."

"Maybe." Meikyo considered this. "I can read some of the labels on Papa's herb pots now, anyway. I couldn't before last summer, but I've been working really hard and now I can. Kaa-san can't always read Papa's scribbles, as she puts it, so I guess in that way I'm helping."

She grinned, the expression lighting up her young face.

"You don't have to be tall or strong to be able to read." She added proudly. "So I can do that and noone has to help me."

"Very true." Myoume agreed. "Well, I'll offer my help to Aidou-san, and then maybe you'll be running around less. If Chichiri's likely to be away a long time…"

She faltered, remembering the original purpose of her journey, and Meikyo fixed her with a serious look.

"Are you very sad, Myoume-neesan?" She asked softly, and Myoume started, staring at the young girl in confusion.

"Very… sad?"

"About your brother who died?" Meikyo tilted her head on one side, eying her elder carefully as she did so. "Even though he was the person who took me away from Kaa-san and Papa, he was still your brother and you still loved him, right? Because sometimes Eiju-nii does stupid things and he makes me mad. But I wouldn't like him to go away or die. It would hurt a lot. So I wondered… if you were sad."

"Oh, I see." Myoume's gaze softened. "Yes, I'm sad. I mean, I miss him. Like you said, I loved him very much. But he was very brave, in the end, Meikyo. He did some horrible things to people — you included — and I'm sorry that he did. But in the end, he tried to make it better by helping us to bring peace to Kutou and save this world. I think, maybe, part of him was sorry too — in the end. And so I hope… Byakko will look after him, now. And help him become stronger before he starts his next life."

"Papa said that Jin-nii was being looked after by Suzaku." Meikyo said thoughtfully. "So I suppose that it's not so bad, then, if you die. So long as one of the Gods is there to look after you."

She dimpled.

“I forgave him, when Papa told me he died.” She added. “Your Oniisan, I mean. I told Suzaku that I wouldn’t stay mad at him, because he probably had a lot of things to deal with, now he was dead, and I didn’t want him to worry about that. I wasn’t badly hurt, after all. And I think… he was a very sad man, Myoume-neesan. He seemed… very sad.”

“So he was.” Myoume agreed, eying the youngster pensively. “Thank you for that, Meikyo. It means a lot to know you feel that way.”

“Well, you’re Myoume-neesan to me.” Meikyo said matter-of-factly. “And so it would hurt you too, if I hated your brother. Even Papa said he didn’t hate him… and that now he could find peace. I hope that too.”

She eyed Myoume curiously.

“Will you stay in Kounan, then, now?”

“No… I was actually going to go to Kutou.” Myoume shook her head, a faint colour touching her cheeks as she remembered her resolve. “To see Ten… Hyoushin and Aoi, among other things. Hyoushin was still quite ill when I left — he hadn’t woken up after our final battle, and I wanted to speak to him.”

“Tenshi-san will get better though, won’t he?” Meikyo looked worried, and Myoume nodded.

“I think so. Slowly.” She agreed. “He was very badly hurt here, you know. He was lucky that he didn’t die. But now he can rest, and he has good doctors helping him, too. Yes, I think he’ll be fine. I just want to see it for myself. Kutou just seems such a long way away.”

“You will stay with us a while, though, won’t you?” Meikyo begged. “Will you? Until Papa gets back — please? Everyone’s going away all the time and I hate it.”

“Well, let’s see what your mother has to say about it.” Myoume said softly. “It might be troublesome for her, to have me here if she’s already short-handed.”

At that moment they reached the farmhouse, and Meikyo skipped ahead, pushing open the ajar door with her elbow as she hurried inside. Myoume tethered her horse to the branch of one of the overhanging trees, patting him gently on the neck as she did so.

“We’ll get you something cool to drink soon, I promise.” She said

softly. “If Aidou-san can’t help, I’ll take you to the stream.”

“Myoume?” At that moment, the door swung back to reveal the apothecary’s wife, her apron dusted with powder and leaf-stains as she cast Myoume a startled look. “Meikyo said she’d met you coming back from the forest — I didn’t expect to see you again quite so soon.”

“I hope I’m not imposing.” Myoume said apologetically. “I’m really passing through on my way to Kutou, but this place has a special feeling for me now. And then I met Meikyo, and ended up here. She said Chichiri was away from home at the moment — and that you were run off your feet. Can I be of any help?”

“Hou Jun.” Aidou’s expression darkened. “Away from home is an understatement. Gallivanting off on divine Suzaku business on a moment’s whim is more like it. But as for your offer, I’d be more than glad if you would. I remember you have a certain amount of herbal knowledge — probably as much as me, which in Hou Jun’s absence will have to suffice.”

“Then I’ll stay and help.” Myoume nodded. “At least till Chichiri comes back. Has he really gone so far away as that?”

“You could say so.” Aidou pursed her lips, then she sighed.

“I haven’t told the children.” She added slowly. “And I don’t think Shishi knows anything about it, either, so long as my brother’s kept his trap shut around her. But Hou Jun… has gone to the Miko’s world. To find Hikari… and probably, to bring her back.”

“To the…” Myoume’s eyes widened, and Aidou nodded.

“I haven’t told the kids all the details because they’ll want to go there too, and it was only thanks to his magic and that dratted Suzaku mage that Hou Jun managed it.” She agreed. “I’m told he should be able to come back — if Shun’u knew what he was talking about, but having it second-hand from an idiot bandit Kashira isn’t the same as getting a coherent explanation. I’m going to have serious words when Hou Jun *does* get back… going off without coming to tell me what he was doing.”

“But… to *get* Hikari?” Myoume frowned. “Why?”

“Something to do with unstable magic.” Aidou shrugged. “I don’t pretend to understand the Suzaku side of my husband’s personality, Myoume. It’s hard enough trying to be supportive of it.”

She sighed heavily, and Myoume reached out a friendly hand, resting it on the older woman’s shoulder.

“You’re worried about him, huh?”

“Yes.” Aidou looked rueful. “I always am, stupid though it is. I know he has to do these things — I know he doesn’t have a choice, and I accepted it when I married him. I wouldn’t change him for any other, and most of the time I can deal with Suzaku’s involvement in our relationship. But… just sometimes…”

She spread her hands.

“The Miko’s world is an unknown place.” She admitted. “And the dangers even less clear. Yes, I’m worried about him.”

“And if Hikari’s magic is unstable… if that means she has to come back… what then?” Myoume looked troubled. “She’s only a child herself, really… to be separated from her home like that…”

“Hikari always has a home with us, Myoume.” Aidou said simply. “Always. I know that’s what Hou Jun is thinking, and I wouldn’t go against it. When she first came here, I asked her to help protect my family, and she did that. For that reason alone, she’s an honorary part of the Ri clan and I’d never let her feel otherwise. But yes, you’re right. It’ll be a wrench, if it works out that way.”

She shrugged.

“I don’t understand it.” She repeated. “And probably even when Hou Jun returns, I won’t understand it any more than I do now. But if you would stay a while and help me with the running of the farm and everything else, I’d appreciate it. Eiju and Meikyo are still very young, after all, to be able to do all the things that I need to get done.”

“With pleasure.” Myoume smiled. “If I can find somewhere to water and graze my horse, I’ll stay as long as you need me to. You were kind to me, after all, and I can’t repay that by ignoring your need. I can get to Kutou a little later… its not like I had a set time or date.”

Aidou eyed her shrewdly.

“You were going to see the Meihi, weren’t you?” She asked softly, and Myoume flushed, nodding her head.

“Is it so obvious?” She asked plaintively, and Aidou smiled, a knowing twinkle in her tired bronze eyes. She shook her head.

“Probably not to everyone.” She responded. “But I did wonder. You seemed very attached to him — I wondered if that was how it would end.”

“Well, it might not end that way, yet. I haven’t been able to speak

to him." Myoume said frankly. "And right now, I said I'll help you, so it can wait a little longer. In truth, I haven't totally decided what to say, so it might help to have a break here with you for a few days."

"With Hou Jun and his wandering, it might be weeks." Aidou said acerbically, and Myoume laughed.

"Men are strange beasts, no matter what race they're from." She reflected, and despite herself, Aidou grinned.

"So they are." She agreed. "That's why they need us to keep them in check. Remember that when you go east, Myoume. In the time you're here, I'll make sure you know everything you need to know about dealing with the opposite sex on a long term basis. Marriage is a survival skill all on its own — and since you're here, I might as well find time to teach you."

She led the way inside.

"Eiju can deal with the animal, since he's managed to do that with a couple of clients of late." She added, pushing open the door of the back room. "Eiju-kun, will you run outside and take care of Myoume's horse? He's tied up outside, and he's hot and bothered."

"Myoume-neesan?" Eiju's head jerked up from where he had been sorting firewood, and he nodded his head. "For sure. Just leave it to me, Okaasan — I'll take as good care of him as I did that rich guy's horse the other day!"

With which odd announcement he was gone, leaving Myoume to stare at her hostess in confusion.

"Rich… guy?"

"It all happens when Hou Jun's away." Aidou nodded, reaching across to pat a formal looking missive that sat on one of the high counters. "A man came from the East just three days ago, dressed in the imperial attire of a Kutou messenger. He had a letter for Hou Jun, which apparently carries the seal of Kintsusei of the East… I have no idea what's in it, but since Hou Jun isn't here, I told him he'd just have to leave it with me. He didn't want to, to begin with, but I convinced him waiting around was a futile aim where my husband was concerned."

Myoume sent her a rueful smile.

"I suppose that was wise, considering he's not back yet." She acknowledged. "And that definitely is the Eastern Emperor's seal. You don't know what it's relating to?"

“No.” Aidou shook her head. “It’s sealed and addressed to my husband, so I wouldn’t have opened it. Even if I did, I expect my reading skills wouldn’t be up to it anyway. Court types have a habit of writing in all that eloquent kanji my husband thinks the children need to learn, and I don’t have any time for it.”

“I wonder what Kintsusei-sama’s intention is.” Myoume looked thoughtful. “He’s not a bad man, Aidou-san, and I’m sure if he did send a message to Chichiri, it wasn’t something bad. I think he really does want peace with Kounan now that all the danger is past.”

“Then no doubt that’s what it means, and he wants my husband to take off to Kutou the moment he gets home.” Aidou sighed resignedly. “As you said, men are almost another species completely when it comes to their feeble grasp of logic.”

Myoume grinned.

“Still, if that is what it is, and if Kutou want Chichiri’s help in some way, then it means Hikari really did bring peace to the East and that your family — and everyone’s family — really is safe.” She said softly. “Meikyo and Eiju can grow up in this world, and that’s a good thing. The darkness I saw for so many years no longer plagues my thoughts either. Hikari really did illuminate it — her name is a more apt choice than Miaka-sama could ever have imagined.”

Aidou was silent for a moment, as if considering this. Then, slowly, she nodded her head.

“We can never repay that girl. Any of us.” She said softly. “And for that reason, Myoume, I will do whatever is asked of me if she is brought back here. I swear it. Thanks to Hikari, my children have a future. And if that’s so, I’ll do everything in my power to ensure she has one, too. No matter what the cost to myself.”

Myoume’s gaze softened.

“I knew that without you saying it.” She admitted. “At least, if Hikari does have to come back, she has good people to take care of her.”

“Well, right now, thanks to Hou Jun’s travelling, we’re also *busy* people.” Aidou said frankly, but a faint glitter of pleasure surfaced in her bronze eyes. “So lets stop talking and start working. I have three or four preparations to see to before nightfall, as well as dinner and the last of the laundry. If I can trust Hou Jun’s instructions and the medication to you, I can begin on other things.”

“No problem.” Myoume agreed. “Just tell me where to start — I’ll

do it with pleasure!"

"You know, you've always been pretty shit at sport, but today I think you could've won awards for it."

As they made their way along the covered walkway from the gymnasium, Arina cast her companion a wry grin, reaching up to pull the band from her thick dark hair. "I swear, Hikari, even fighting demons and whatever in this other world doesn't seem to have improved your fitness… I would'a thought that, given all the walking you said you did, you'd be top of the class today."

"I don't think that will ever happen." Hikari sighed, sinking down onto one of the benches as she cast a glance out at the clouded, rain-soaked sky. "I don't know. It feels really surreal to be here and to think that it's only been a few days. It feels like I've been away months, and I'm not kidding. Time really does pass quicker over there… it's the weirdest feeling."

"Well, if you ask me, I know what's on your mind." Arina eyed her playfully. "This bishounen of yours — Aoi. That was his name, wasn't it? On Saturday night you said his name in your sleep at least twice — you're still badly crushing on him, aren't you?"

"It's not a crush." Hikari reddened, twisting her fingers together. "I told you that. And why were you listening to me talking in my sleep anyway? Why weren't you sleeping? It was gone two before either of us stopped talking about things."

"I know." Arina owned. "Truth is, all that talking made me thoughtful, I guess. About a lot of things. I had too much on my mind, and that's why."

"Being the Miko really does impact on everyone, somehow, doesn't it?" Hikari looked pensive. "I'm really glad that you know about this, Arina. I feel so disjointed, being back here like this — at least there's someone I can talk to."

"Well, if I told anyone they'd say I was nuts — or attention whoring." Arina reflected. "But it's cool. I guess it's what I'm here for, after all."

She reached across to grab her friend by the hands, yanking her to her feet, but as she did so, Hikari felt a prickle of something dart between her touch and her friend's. Arina let out an exclamation, pulling her fingers back.

"Hey! Does being Seiryuu no Miko include being installed with

your own power pack? That hurt, Hi-chan — give your electricity to someone else, huh?"

"Electricity?" Hikari's brows knitted together and she glanced at her fingers in surprise. "That's weird. I've never done that before. I'm sorry… I didn't mean to."

"I guess it's all right." Arina sighed, shaking her head resignedly. "Look, we should get changed. Else what's going to happen to your new resolve to actually pass a few classes before the exams, huh? It's only one day in and you're already dawdling around here."

"I know. I guess habits are hard to break." Hikari stifled a yawn. "All right. I'm coming. I just find it hard to get excited about maths."

"Pity you couldn't bring your boyfriend back with you, then." Arina reflected. "Maybe he could've tutored you. You said he was a smartass, right?"

"That's so not a nice way to put it." Hikari put her hands on her hips, glaring at her friend indignantly. Then she relented, laughing. "But you're right. Except that I'd not be concentrating on a thing he was saying, so it'd still have been useless."

"But at least the view would've been nice." Arina winked at her. "Every cloud has a silver lining — isn't that what people say?"

"Suppose." Hikari agreed, following her friend inside the main school building as they made their way to the changing rooms. "I miss him a lot, Ari. I don't like being separated from him like this. I keep wondering what's happening in Kutou now… or how much time has passed since I left. It could even have been months — what if he's forgotten about me already? I couldn't stand it if he did."

"This guy who gave you his mother's ring, took you to her grave and told you he wanted to marry you?" Arina's eyebrow twitched up. "You think so? He sounds more of the clingy, stalker type to me… I mean, taking you to meet his dead Ma is a bit of overkill. He's probably tattooing your name on his arm with whatever sharp things they have in this ShijinTenchishou as we speak."

"I hope not." Hikari shivered. "That would be gross. Besides, Aoi's never really liked blood… though come to think of it, that's not so true any more. But even so, I don't think he'd mutilate himself on my behalf. He's not some creepy obsessive. He's just… Aoi."

"Sukunami-san, Kobayashi-san, I wondered if we'd lost you."

As they entered the changing rooms, a tall girl cast them a

disparaging look, and Arina grimaced.

“Look at the good Class President, checking up on us like we’re naughty elementary school brats.” She muttered.

“Kobayashi-san thinks she’s something special, even though she can’t catch a volleyball.” The tall girl’s companion observed snidely. “Maybe if the boys class had been watching us play, things would have been different. I’m sure she would have performed for them.”

“Damn right.” Arina offered them a bitter smile. “But they weren’t, so what’s the point? Sweat smudges mascara. One day, when you’re brave enough to use it, you’ll know that.”

She cast Hikari a glance, then, “Come on, Hi-chan. We don’t have time to waste exchanging words with these suck-ups.”

“Wait a moment.” The tall girl held up her hands. “*You* can go, Kobayashi-san. I want to speak to Sukunami-san a moment… it won’t take long.”

“Irigawa-san?” Hikari cast her a startled glance. “With me? About what, exactly?”

“Your absences, of course.” The girl gave her a faint, slightly dismissive smile. “Considering your low grades, you’re going to bring down the class’s average when it comes to tests at this rate. Do you think you can afford to take time off, when there are important things such as High School exams on the horizon? Not that it matters to us whether or not you get into High School, but I’d like to think that, considering my position as President, all of the class I’m leading are going to do their best when it comes to final sitting.”

“My…” Hikari’s eyes widened, as she felt the anger and indignation well up inside of her. “Do you think I chose to be off? I wasn’t playing truant… I couldn’t come to school!”

“She was ill, wasn’t she?” Arina added. “Do you come to school when you’re ill, President-sama?”

Her tone was rich with sarcasm, and Irigawa eyed her with dislike.

“Of course.” She said stiffly. “I come to school *every* day.”

“Of course.” Arina rolled her eyes.

Irigawa turned her gaze back towards Hikari.

“Well?” She pressed. “Don’t you think it’s about time you stopped fooling around and started focusing on the important things? You can’t play school-kid forever. In a few months, your entire future

could be decided. Doesn't that bother you even a little bit?"

"My entire future?" Hikari echoed, anger sparking in her hazel eyes, and from somewhere inside her, she felt the flare of crimson magic begin to knot itself around her heart as a phoenix's wings beat in her ears. "My important things? Why the hell is any of that any of your business? You don't have a clue what important things are! You don't have a clue about anything except classwork and exams and that's fine but it's not the only thing that matters in this life. *People* matter too, you know. Their feelings -their dreams — the things they want to fight for. They can't all be got to by taking exams… don't you realise that?"

"Sukunami-san?" Irigawa stared at her, and Hikari's eyes narrowed as she clenched her fists.

"I don't care what you think of my grades." She added coldly. "They're *my* problem, not yours. So butt out of it, all right?"

"Woah. Cool it, Hi-chan." Arina warned. "There's no use losing your temper with these idiots. You'll just make the both of us later."

Hikari opened her eyes to retort, but as she did so, she saw the faintest prickle of red light dance around the tips of her fingers and she faltered, her eyes widening in disbelief. As she registered Suzaku's indignant surge within her, she drew breath sharply, clutching a hand to her chest as she fought to keep the rising, intoxicating wave of power at bay.

"Hikari?" Arina sounded concerned, but Hikari could not focus on her. All she knew was that she had to get away from here, and fast, before she caused someone harm. She pushed past the unprepared Irigawa, bolting from the room and along the hallway as she heard Arina yell her name once more. She did not stop, however, fear coursing her veins as she fought valiantly against the energy that danced inside of her. As she ran, giddy waves washed over her body, and she stumbled, reaching out to grasp hold of the wall as the pounding sensation in her head began to blur into one incessant sound.

"Hi-chan?" Arina's voice was close now, and she felt a hand on her arm, but she shook it off, knowing that if she didn't get away, she might cause her friend harm. She darted forward, pushing open the door of the girl's toilets as the dizziness got the better of her, and as the world swam around her she gripped hold of the sink, certain that if it continued she would either explode or be sick.

At her touch, the basin of the sink trembled and then, with a

resounding splitting sound it began to crack right across, causing her to release it hurriedly, backing against the door of a cubicle as she stared at her fingers in horror.

"What am I doing?" She whispered. "Shit… what have I become?"

She glanced up, seeing her reflection in the mirror for the first time, and her eyes widened as she realised that, far from growing stronger, it had become yet more blurry and translucent. Slowly she reached up to touch her face, unnerved by what she saw.

"What *am* I?" She murmured, sinking to the floor as the strength in her legs gave out. As Suzaku's power waned inside of her, she felt tears spill down her cheeks, and she buried her head in her arms, huddling up against the wall as her fear took hold of her tired, muddled body.

"Shit, Hi-chan, I thought you were supposed to be tired."

Arina's voice jerked her back to reality, and her head shot up, her gaze meeting her friend's as the other girl came towards her, stopping dead as she registered the broken sink.

"Dammit, Hikari, what did you *do*?"

"I didn't… I didn't… mean to." Hikari whispered. "It was… Suzaku."

"Suzaku?" Arina's eyes became wide with disbelief. "Didn't you leave that guy behind when you left Kounan?"

"I… thought that it was… over." Hikari's voice shook. "But I'm still Suzaku no Shinzahou. Raising Seiryuu didn't stop me being that. Seiryuu pulled out of my body — he took his power away. But Suzaku… didn't. He hasn't… I'm still… and it's inside of me. I felt it… bubbling up like I was going to explode. It was burning through my heart and I knew if I stayed… I might have… hurt someone."

Arina looked at the sink again, then sighed, dropping down at her friend's side.

"Judging by the state of that thing, I'd say you weren't wrong." She said softly. "But we can't stay here. If someone sees that, they'll think you did it."

"I*did* do it!"

"Yes, but not on purpose." Arina said impatiently. "Do you think that the Principal is going to sit back and accept the fact that it was a God from another world who broke the sink? I don't think so! Think

rationally for a moment, will you? Can you stand up?"

"I… I think so." Hikari nodded slowly. "It's died down now… it's quieted. But for a moment, I didn't know what I might do. Suzaku's so powerful… and in this world, there's nobody who understands what that means. Not even me."

"You're just as much trouble now as you were before, in fact." Arina said resignedly, pulling her friend to her feet and slipping an arm around her shoulders. "Come on. Let's just skip off class this afternoon, huh? I'll take you to the medical room. After all, you were off sick last week -they won't think it's odd, and I can stay with you, so I can miss maths class too."

"What if it comes back? I don't want to hurt you or anyone else."

"I'll take my chances." Arina shrugged. "I'm determined to be a proper friend to you this time out, so don't argue with me, all right? Besides, you look so washed out you couldn't fight your own shadow at the…"

She faltered, glancing at the ground, then back up at her friend, and Hikari shot her a confused look.

"Ari?"

"Your shadow." Arina murmured. "To hell with not fighting it — did Suzaku scare it off?"

"My…?" Hikari turned to glance at the ground, fear touching her heart once more as she registered Arina's words. "But… why don't I have one?"

"If you don't know, why do you think I would?" Arina demanded. "You're the one who's done all the strange shit of late — I'm just a hanger-on."

"It's like my reflection." Hikari whispered, and Arina stared at her.

"Reflection?" She repeated. "You mean, it's still… not right?"

"It's worse." Hikari admitted. "But I… I don't understand. I don't know…"

"Then it's time you talked to Miaka-san, isn't it?" Arina looked apprehensive. "I mean, it's serious shit, Hikari… we can't let it go any more."

Before Hikari could reply, the school intercom system crackled into life, and the voice of the secretary blared through the chamber.

"This is a message for Sukunami Hikari of class 3-A. Sukunami Hikari, Class 3-A. Please come to the front office immediately for a message from your parents. I repeat, this is a message for Sukunami Hikari of class 3-A — please come to the front office immediately for a message from your parents. Thank you."

"I don't suppose that's a coincidence, huh?" Arina gazed up at the speaker pensively, and Hikari sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

"Who knows?" She murmured. "But… right now… I'm glad. Come with me, Ari, please. In case I faint or fall down, because I might."

"No problem. I was going to anyway." Arina assured her. "I'm a part of all of this now — right?"

"I suppose so." Hikari agreed, smiling faintly. "Sorry for getting you messed up in it."

"Believe me, it's fine." Arina grinned back. "I want to be involved. It's not like anything that exciting is happening in my life right now, in any case. I'm more than happy to steal a little bit of it from yours."

"I wish it wasn't happening to me." Hikari admitted, as they made their way slowly towards the front office. "I don't regret going — I love Aoi and miss Shishi and everyone there. But I don't know why… it's still inside of me. It doesn't feel right, and it scares me. I don't want to break sinks or have to run from Class Presidents because I don't know what might happen if I don't. And I don't understand what's happening to me… why my shadow is gone and my reflection is fading away."

"You're not the only one." Arina admitted. "Which is the other reason I'm coming with you."

Hikari sent her friend another feeble smile, comforted by the uncharacteristic resolution in Arina's dark eyes.

"It's nice, being able to talk to you about stuff." She murmured. "We should have done it a long time ago… shouldn't we?"

"No kidding." Arina admitted. "But better late than never, ain't that what they say?"

She gave her friend's arm a little tug. "Hey, it's not just a message, Hi-chan. Looks like Sukunami-san and Miaka-san are here in person to speak to you. And… who's that weird looking guy with them? I haven't seen him before — is he a friend of your family or something?"

Hikari glanced up, letting out an exclamation as she registered the

person Arina was indicating.

"*Chi… chiri*?" She whispered, and as if his sharp ears had caught her words, the sorcerer turned, meeting her gaze with a solemn ruby one of his own. Slowly he held his hands out to her, and Hikari stumbled forward in disbelief, allowing him to take her fingers in hers. As they made contact, she felt something soothing and gentle wash over her, and she stared at him in surprise, realising that he had read her uncertain emotions perfectly, and was using his own magic to soothe them.

"Suzaku's been mistreating you already, I see." He murmured, and Hikari was almost sure she heard a note of apology in his tones. "Am I too late?"

"Too late?" Hikari repeated. "I don't… what are you… what are you doing here? I didn't think you could come here."

"Hisei helped me, because it was important I did." Chichiri said gravely. "We need to speak to you, Hikari. It's urgent that we do."

His gaze flitted to the confused Arina, and Hikari reached out to touch her friend's arm.

"This is Arina." She said simply. "Kobayashi Arina. My friend from this world. Ari, this is Ri Hou Jun — Chichiri. He's a person from… from the other world. From Kounan."

"Kounan, huh?" Arina's eyes narrowed as she scrutinised the stranger carefully. Then she bowed her head. "Pleased to meet you, Chichiri-san."

"Likewise, though I'd have preferred better circumstances." Chichiri offered another sombre smile. "As it is…"

He paused, glancing at Miaka, and Hikari saw her mother nod sadly.

"We're taking you home, Hikari." She said softly. "Because we need to talk and in some depth. It's all right — I've cleared it with the school. They think there's a family emergency, and I suppose, in some ways, there is. So you can come with us — now."

"Right now?" Hikari looked startled, and Taka nodded.

"Right now." He agreed. "Arina, I'm sorry to have caused you any trouble — you should hurry back to your class before you're late."

"I'm not going to class." Arina said firmly. "If something's going on with Hikari involving the other world, I'm involved too. She said I was

a part of it too, now, since I know all about it. Besides, I don't think she's very well, Sukunami-san. She was worried she might pass out, and some weird things happened…"

"Weird things?" Chichiri eyed Hikari sharply, and Hikari lowered her gaze.

"I'm sort of scared, and sort of confused." She admitted. "And… I'd like Ari to come with me, too — if it's all right. She looked after me — and… I don't want to leave her out of things any more."

"Then the car's waiting outside." Taka said briefly, ignoring his wife's startled expression. "If that's how it is, lets go now."

Arina slipped her hand into Hikari's, squeezing it tightly.

"Noone will care at home if I get an unauthorised absence or two." She said evenly. "So don't worry about me being in trouble. It won't matter at all, and Hikari is more important."

"You two have been friends some time, I think?" Chichiri asked, as they stepped out into the clearing atmosphere, and Hikari nodded.

"Since we began middle school." She agreed softly. "Why? Chichiri, what's going on? I don't understand why I feel so strange — is that why you're here?"

Chichiri was silent for a moment, and Hikari registered the same far-away, troubled look as he had worn the morning they had talked about his family. She bit her lip.

"It has something to do with Suzaku's magic, doesn't it?" She murmured, and slowly Chichiri nodded his head.

"Yes." He agreed. "It does."

"And something to do with Hi-chan not having a shadow any more?" Arina piped in, causing the sorcerer to start, turning to stare at her in surprise. "Sorry..I guess I'm butting in. But *you* don't have one either — even though the sun's coming out, I noticed you don't cast a shadow on the ground and inside, Hikari wasn't, either. So…"

"*Hikari*?" Miaka's eyes became alarmed, and Hikari swallowed hard.

"Arina's right." She said sadly. "And my reflection… is fading, too. I don't know why. It was odd since I got back, but I didn't want to worry you. I thought it would settle, but…"

"Tell us what happened inside the school, Hikari." Taka said softly, and Hikari glanced at the ground.

“I broke the sink.” She admitted. “I didn’t mean to, but it was better that than… than breaking someone. Suzaku was inside of me — he was awake and I think if I hadn’t run away, I might have… his power might have… hurt somebody.”

Chichiri’s expression became even graver, and an unspoken message passed between him and his two old allies. Then, at length, he sighed.

“Hisei was right, then. There is nothing to be done but this.” He murmured.

“This being…?” Arina demanded, and Chichiri eyed her with a faint smile.

“You’re a better friend than maybe you realise, Arina-chan.” He reflected. “And that makes me all the more sorry for coming here and upsetting things like this. But the situation is… Hikari… is no longer a person of this world. And because of that… I… came to take her back with me to Kounan.”

“No longer a person of this world?” Hikari’s heart froze inside her chest. “But… how? *Why*?”

“Because Seiryuu left you, you’re no longer his Miko.” Chichiri said sadly. “It’s the Miko that belongs in this world — but you’re also Suzaku’s treasure. Without Seiryuu’s call, you no longer have a place here. You are simply the treasure Suzaku no Miko blessed… and that belongs in Kounan. You were born a child of both worlds, not just of this one. Now you duty as Seiryuu no Miko is over, your body is changing to reflect that fact… I’m sorry.”

“No way…” Arina murmured, her expression stricken. “You mean… you’re going to take Hi-chan away? From her family? From me? *Forever*?”

“I’m afraid so.” Chichiri agreed softly.

He cast Hikari a sad glance.

“I won’t take you against your will, so in the end, you have to agree to come.” He added. “I promised your parents that, and as a father, I couldn’t kidnap a child and hold her somewhere she didn’t want to go. But if you’ve already experienced it — maybe you’ll understand why I had to come here like this. Your magic is unsealed, now. To raise Seiryuu, you unsealed it. You made that choice, to ask Suzaku for help — didn’t you?”

“Yes.” Hikari agreed numbly. “But…”

“You should have gone back to this world after the summoning, but you didn’t.” Chichiri added. “I was slow, that’s all, in realising why we had to send you back. For that, I also apologise. The truth is, you shouldn’t have left. Especially not with your magic flying freely like this. This world makes it difficult to control what power you or I might have. It’s the reason your father lost his Seishi self to come here and be with your mother. And although I’ve tried to find an alternative solution, it all comes back to the same thing. This world is rejecting you — your shadow and your reflection just prove it. You’re not part of this world, no matter how much you want to be. You can stay here, but even if you didn’t harm anyone, it’ll get to a point where you can no longer live alongside other people. So… in the end…”

He faltered, and Hikari could see the genuine pain in his ruby gaze.

“I feel guilty that you got involved in this to help save my family, and now I’m taking you away from yours.” He murmured. “I’m truly sorry, Hikari-chan. All I can do is tell you that if you do come back to Kounan, you always have a place with Aidou and I. No matter what.”

“You’re not going to go, are you?” Arina looked alarmed. “Hi-chan… surely this magic of yours can be turned off somehow? I mean, you never had it before…”

“No.” Hikari swallowed hard, turning to face her friend with tearful eyes. “No, Chichiri is… right. I’ve tried not to feel it, but I *am* different since I came back. When I first came, after Jin died, I felt an alien in this world, but I thought that was because of the situation. And I couldn’t bear it if someone got hurt.”

She swallowed again, as the tears began to trickle once more down her cheeks.

“I have to go back.” She whispered. “So that that doesn’t happen. I made the choice to stay in that world and to save Kutou. If this is the result, I… I have to do as Chichiri says. I have to go back.”

“Chichiri said he’d give you tonight to prepare yourself.” Taka said softly, and Hikari could hear the pain in his voice. “Us too, for that matter. He’s going to stay and with any luck, he’ll be able to help you if your magic flares up again. Either way, we’re willing to take the risk, even if you did break a sink.”

Hikari took a deep breath, then, slowly, she nodded her head.

“In that case, I want Arina to stay, too.” She said softly. “If she can… if it’s my last… last chance to spend time here with you all.”

“There might be a chance, when your magic is better controlled, that you can come and visit.” Chichiri said gently. “And I promise to work with you as hard as I can to help you achieve that. There are a lot of people in the ShijinTenchishou who love you, after all… a lot of people who will help you adjust.”

“Chichiri…”

Taka paused, eying his old battle partner, then he sighed, shaking his head.

“I know you’ll do everything you can to help her.” He said heavily. “And that I needn’t ask for it. You and Tasuki both. But I want to ask it anyway. Hikari is something very precious to Miaka and I. If it wasn’t that this is obviously going to hurt her, we wouldn’t let her go. But both of us… both of us want her to be happy and healthy, whatever that ends up changing. I came from that world originally, and I have enough of Tamahome’s memory to remember what it was like, the first time I came here and tried to fit in. But Tamahome… that Tamahome… lost his family to Suboshi’s Ryuuseisui. If he hadn’t…”

He faltered, and Miaka grasped Chichiri by the hands.

“Taka’s saying that even though we know you will, we want you to watch over Hikari for us.” She said unevenly. “Not as Suzaku no Shinzahou, but as the daughter of people who still consider you a close, dear friend. Even if we can’t often meet, Chichiri — you understand, don’t you?”

“I understand.” Chichiri nodded his head. ‘And you have my word. As Chichiri of Suzaku, it’s my duty to protect her as the Shinzahou she is. But as Ri Hou Jun, I’ll look after her as though she was a true member of my family. My children already consider her “oneesan’. I promise that I will do my best — and Tasuki too — to ensure she’s safe and happy in the other world. So long as we have life in us, Miaka, you have my solemn word.”

“Then we should head back to the apartment.” Taka said quietly. “And talk out exactly what’s going to happen… tomorrow.”

Chapter 33

Chapter Thirty Two

"Well, this is it, you know."

As the haze of Suzaku's magic glimmered and died from around the edges of Chichiri's charmed *kesa*, the sorcerer cast his companion a glance, sympathy and regret glittering in his ruby gaze as he absorbed the demeanour of the girl beside him. She had not spoken much, he reflected, since they had eaten breakfast, and had fallen into a pensive, wistful reverie almost as soon as he had told her it was time for them to go. Although her magic had not flared up any during the night, Chichiri was not fooled by her pretence of calm, knowing that the pale face and shadowy eyes masked a child struggling tooth and nail to confine the wildly flickering spirit that surged within her.

Hikari did not answer him, and Chichiri sighed, reaching out to put a hand on her arm.

"I'm sorry, Hikari-chan." He said softly. "I know I keep saying it, but it's true."

Hikari pursed her lips, and for a moment the silence continued. Then she let out a heavy sigh.

"It isn't something *you've* done." She said quietly, though Chichiri could detect a faint wavering in her tones. "*I* decided to come back. You said you wouldn't force me and you haven't — so don't apologise for it. It isn't… your fault."

"I'm sure that doesn't make it any easier for either one of us." Chichiri said evenly, and Hikari nodded slowly.

"True." She acknowledged. "But… when you explained it, it made sense. And now… for the last couple of days, I've felt like I was fighting something inside of me. I didn't know how to put it into words, but I knew something was different. Then what happened at school — I can't be in that world when I'm like this. Now I'm back here, it's calmed. I don't feel so on edge. But…"

She faltered, lowering her gaze, and Chichiri knew she was fighting tears.

"I'm going to miss them so much." She whispered. "I didn't realise how important they all were until now."

Chichiri was silent for a moment. Then he reached out to take her by the arm, gently leading her along the forest-lined pathway that led to the Eastern Village.

“It’s human nature not to know what you have until you don’t have it any more.” He reflected honestly. “But you have memories, and they’ll help in time. Besides, they’re not dead, Hikari. It isn’t that you won’t ever see or hear from them again. I promise to do all I can to help you manage your magic so that you can go there and be stable in that environment. Even if it’s only for short visits — it isn’t a permanent goodbye.”

He offered her a smile.

“And you aren’t alone here.” He added. “Aidou and I will make absolutely sure of that, you know. This place — my village — you can consider it your home as long as you need to.”

Hikari managed a faint smile in return, nodding her head.

“I’m glad about that.” She admitted. “You’ve been kind to me, even right at the start when I was rude to you about your scar. I’m glad that I’ve people like you and Aidou-san to fall back on, because there’s so much I don’t know, here. I can’t read or write the language properly. I don’t understand the political system and I still don’t like horses. I have a lot of things to get used to… a lot of things to learn.”

“Yes.” Chichiri agreed. “But doing so will prove a distraction, I hope, from the more immediate fact of being separated from your home.”

He eyed her keenly.

“Besides, I think I might take you to the palace again, when you’re a little more settled in.” He added. “Reizeitei-sama will be glad of your company, and I think that I might be able to persuade him to engage a suitable tutor to help you learn your letters and other things. If you wanted, of course. It’s up to you — if you feel like Aidou does, you don’t have to bother with being literate beyond the basic level. But since you’re a student in your own world, I thought… and I’m not really qualified to teach you anything other than magic, even though I school Eiju and Meikyo in various kanji.”

He shrugged.

“Suzaku no Shinzahou is potentially a valuable asset to Reizeitei-sama and his court.” He added. “As such, she should have a proper education — so think upon it, won’t you?”

“At the palace?” Hikari looked taken aback. “Chichiri, right now, I…”

She trailed off, and Chichiri nodded.

“I know.” He said evenly. “But nothing has to happen right away. You have a lot of time, Hikari. Don’t run into anything. Take time to think and see how you feel.”

He smiled.

“I only mentioned Reizeitei-sama because I think he might well understand your loneliness.” He added. “He’s experienced enough of it over the years, after all. You and he are alike — both children of Seishi who can no longer guide you. I’ve done my best to help him, and to remain a friend in a world where politics overtake everything else. You’re not from that world, so perhaps you might do the same — I think you may be good for one another, when you’ve had a little time to heal.”

“I see.” Hikari’s expression became thoughtful. “I suppose that makes sense. After all, I don’t want anything from Reizeitei-sama. I don’t want to marry him, or get any kind of special favours. Perhaps you’re right. Maybe… when I’ve settled… I will do as you say.”

She sighed.

“If I ever settle. Right now I don’t feel like I can, but I suppose time will tell.”

“Small steps at a time.” Chichiri told her gently, gesturing towards the village boundary as he did so. “This place is enough for now. There are people here who love you, after all — and unless I’m much mistaken, they’re not just people from Kounan, either. It might be the transfer from your world to this, but I’m almost sure I feel Myoume’s chi among the rest.”

“Myoume?” Hikari’s eyes widened. “Back in Kounan? But I thought… she intended to go back… to…”

“Kutou?” Chichiri eyed her keenly, and Hikari flushed, shrugging.

“Maybe.” She said cautiously. “I didn’t expect her here, in any case.”

“I suspect it’s a stopping off point mid-journey.” Chichiri said wisely, and Hikari cast him a doubtful look.

“Chichiri… Aoi’s in Kutou now, isn’t he?” She asked hesitantly, and Chichiri nodded.

“To the best of my knowledge, yes.” He agreed. “He left not long after you did, so he should have got home by now.”

“I see.” Hikari looked sad. “I’d like to see him, too. No, more than that — I need to see him. If I’m stuck in this world… I can’t be stuck here without him. But if he’s in Kutou…”

She faltered, and Chichiri rested a hand on her shoulder.

“When you’re more settled, I promise to take you to Kutou.” He said seriously. “You and Myoume too, if she wants a quick ride in that direction. You have my word, Hikari-chan. We’ll go and see Aoi — just as soon as you’ve had a chance to re-acclimatise to this place.”

Relief and gratitude mingled in his companion’s eyes, and Chichiri found he was glad to see it as he grinned, reaching over to squeeze her hands playfully.

“Right now, though, we’re about to descend on my family.” He said frankly. “I don’t know quite how long we’ve been gone, you know, but I expect my wife will be more than a little cross about it — so I need you as my defence, Hikari-chan… if she sees you here too, it might stop her from being quite so angry with me.”

“We’ll see about that, Hou Jun.”

Aidou’s voice came from behind them at that point and the two swung around, Chichiri’s expression becoming rueful as he gauged his wife’s tense, displeased demeanour. Deep in her bronze eyes he could see the flickers of anxiety which told him her true feelings on the subject, and he sighed, reaching out to take her fingers in his.

“I’m sorry, Aidou-chan.” He said sincerely, bowing his head apologetically as he did so. “Suzaku asked it of me, and I couldn’t refuse him.”

“That’s all very well, when you disappear for two weeks or more without a word.” Aidou said archly. Then she caught sight of Hikari, and her expression softened.

“Well, Hikari-chan. Should I say,” Welcome home? “She asked softly, and Hikari sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

“I suppose that’s what it is.” She admitted. “I did call Kounan ‘home’ once before, but I didn’t realise it would truly come to be that. Chichiri’s said I can stay here though — is that… all right with you, too?”

“Of course it is. You shouldn’t even need to ask.” Aidou agreed. “Although those clothes… we’ll have to do something about those, to

begin with. If you're staying here, the sooner I teach you to make and mend your own the better, because the stuff from your world is beyond strange."

"I… suppose it is." Hikari glanced down at herself. "But I'd like to keep a few of my own things too, Aidou-san."

She touched the bag on her shoulder absently.

"Chichiri didn't let me bring too much with me, because he said it would make it difficult with the pull of magic already faint." She added. "But I have brought… some things. Things that hold memories, and are precious. Pictures, and keepsakes, and a few things like that. Mother also sent me with a message for Tasuki, since she hasn't seen him this trip — I promised to read it to him, since he can't read her writing. And I have some of my own clothes — I'd like to keep them too, even if I can't wear them every day."

"I suppose that's fair." Aidou acknowledged. "But you'll scare half the village walking around like that — the both of you will, in fact. Come into the farmhouse and change, before you get strange looks — everyone already expects insanity from Hou Jun, but I wouldn't like it put about that it's rubbing off on our guests."

With which cutting statement she turned on her heel, heading back towards the house. Chichiri tut-tutted under his breath, looking rueful.

"Yes, I'm in trouble." He murmured, and Hikari shot him a faint smile.

"She was worried about you, I think." She replied softly. "That's all."

"Papa! Papa!"

As they reached the farmhouse, Meikyo came running out, her brother in hot pursuit as they greeted the new arrivals eagerly. "Papa, you came home! And Hikari-neechan and… what are you wearing, Papa? What kind of clothing is that?"

"It looks weird." Eiju eyed his father critically. "Papa, are you going to make me wear something like that, too? Because it looks messed up."

"No — this is clothing like they wear in Hikari's world, but I'll be glad to change out of it." Chichiri admitted, touching the sleeves absently. "I haven't had a chance to change yet. I'm glad to see the both of you fit and well — your mother says it's been more than two weeks, so I'm sorry for that. It wasn't intentional — but time is strange

in Hikari's world, and it couldn't be helped."

"It's okay." Meikyo flung her arms around him, gazing up at him with contented ruby eyes. "You're home now, and so is Hikari-neechan. Is she staying with us now? For always and always and always?"

"That's the plan, or so it seems." Chichiri nodded, patting his daughter gently on the head. "Is that all right with you, Mei-chan? Eiju-kun, you too — do you mind if Hikari becomes a permanent part of our family?"

"Of course we don't." Meikyo said emphatically. "Hikari-neechan belongs with us. It's sad when people go away — I hope she can stay with us always."

"I guess it's all right." Eiju said thoughtfully. "This way Meikyo and I won't have so many chores to do, if there's someone else to help."

"That's no kind of welcoming attitude." Aidou scolded, and Eiju looked sheepish.

"But it's true, Okaa-san." He pointed out. "Hikari-neechan is taller than Meikyo or me, so there must be lots of things she can do instead of us."

"Well, so you are back after all."

Myoume joined the group at that moment, concern and warmth in her indigo eyes. "I'm glad to see you, Hikari, even if you're not glad yet. And I'm glad I decided to stop in Kounan a while and help Aidou-san out — since it means I got to see both you and Chichiri before I went East."

"I'll take you both East, in a few days, when my wife's forgiven me for my last jaunt away from the village." Chichiri added, offering Aidou a rueful smile as she arched an eyebrow meaningfully in his direction. "That is, providing she lets me out of her sight again."

"That reminds me." Aidou frowned. "A missive came from you from that place, Hou Jun — an Imperial messenger delivered it by hand and it bears a seal which Myoume says is definitely that of Kintsusei of Kutou. I don't know what it contains — but if it's a summons, you'd better go there and tell him that the Emperor you answer to is Reizeitei-sama in Eiyou and that he's not to go randomly calling men away from their families."

"A missive from the East?" Chichiri's eyes widened. "I see. That's something I wasn't expecting — but I suppose I should read it, in any

case.”

He cast Hikari a glance.

“What about you, Hikari-chan? Is there anything we can do for you right now?”

Hikari hesitated for a moment, then she nodded.

“I… I’d like to see Shishi.” She said softly. “Please. If… if she’s not busy.”

“Shishi, huh?” Aidou pursed her lips. “Well, she’s probably on the mountain, so I doubt she’s doing anything she couldn’t leave at a moment’s notice.”

“Eiju-kun, run up the mountain path and tell her that Hikari’s here, will you?” Chichiri cast his son a grin. “You know the way and you’re quite quick when you choose to be. Bring her back with you, if you can — if your uncle asks why, tell him I’ve asked for her. Okay?”

“Okay.” Eiju’s eyes sparkled, and Chichiri knew that he was proud at being entrusted with such an errand. “I’ll be back as quick as lightning — you wait and see!”

With that he hared off towards the mountain path, and Aidou sighed.

“The more time he spends near that place, the more like one of Shun’u’s rogues he’s going to become.” She said resignedly. “Don’t let too much of Shishi rub off on you, Hikari-chan.”

“I think Hikari and Shishi have already been good for one another.” Myoume said pensively. “And I know Shishi’ll be able to help Hikari adjust to life in Kounan — probably better than anyone else, in truth. I wouldn’t worry, Aidou-san. I think Hikari’s probably in safe hands with that cub.”

“Well, maybe… but even so, her manners are abysmal.” Aidou shook her head in defeat.

Chichiri smiled.

“I don’t think Hikari’s careless enough to start speaking mountain slang.” He said lightly. “Where is this message, Aidou-chan? The sooner I read it, the sooner I’ll know what I should do about it.”

“In the back room.” Aidou told him. “I put it on one side. The messenger would have liked to have given it to you in person, but I told him he’d sooner die of old age than succeed if he waited around, given your track record. So he left it with me and headed back.”

“You really can be scathing sometimes, you know that?” Chichiri reflected good-naturedly, pushing open the door of the house as he made his way through to the back room, his wife and Myoume in tow. “Here? On the unit? I see.”

“That’s it.” Aidou agreed. “It’s not exactly the kind of message we receive here on a daily basis, so you can hardly miss it.”

“Indeed not.” Chichiri nodded, slipping his nail beneath the seal and unfastening the letter’s ties. Carefully he unrolled it, skimming his gaze down the document as he absorbed the contents. It was written in an elegant court hand, but with a jolt Chichiri realised it had not been produced by one of Kutou’s many scribes. Instead, it was the neat, faintly curved script of the Emperor himself, and his brows knitted together.

“From Kintsusei-sama indeed.” He murmured. “Written in the Imperial hand, directly and personally to an apothecary living in the south-west of Kounan. Yet he writes to me as if I’m somehow the solution to his country’s problems — a bridge between the East and the West in this time of change.”

“Isn’t that the case, though?” Myoume asked softly, and Chichiri shrugged his shoulders, re-folding the letter.

“I’m Suzaku’s Seishi.” He responded evenly. “I’m honoured by his request for a meeting, but even if I went there, I’m not Emperor of Kounan and I don’t make those decisions. I’ve always emphasised the importance for peace with Bou… Reizeitei-sama, but even so…”

Myoume smiled, shaking her head.

“You haven’t met Kintsusei-sama.” She said quietly. “I have. While we were in Kutou, Chichiri, I spoke to him on a few occasions. He is not an Imperial man in all regards — born the son of the previous Emperor, but not raised as such and desperate to break away from Shoukitei’s dark shadow. He understands the need for humility, and how to utilise it when pride will not do.”

She gestured to the letter.

“By writing to you himself, he’s asking you for help as himself.” She added. “He genuinely wants to reach out to Reizeitei-sama and forge bonds, but he doesn’t know how to do it. But you are a link in that chain. He knows that you were involved in our helping to raise Seiryuu. He will probably have heard even more from Aoi about how you handled the situation of his spying, and tackled the subject of Nakago. You’re exactly the right sort of person for Kintsusei-sama to

seek out in this aftermath. To go directly to an Emperor of a formerly hostile nation is not something Kutou is strong enough to do, yet. But to approach someone who has already given an impression of being sympathetic to Eastern problems… don't you see it that way, too?"

Chichiri pursed his lips, digesting this slowly. Then he nodded.

"I suppose that's true." He owned. "He's calling me as Suzaku's Chichiri, and as Suzaku's Chichiri, I won't snub his request. He hasn't ordered me to go anywhere — or even tried to assert authority. I wouldn't say he's begged me — his language is too eloquent for that. But it's the call of a man who is looking for allies… so I'll go and I'll hear what he has to say."

He smiled.

"After all, I still have that remedy I need Hyoushin to translate." He added. "Depending on how well he is, I'd like to see him again. After all, he has faith in this Emperor and if you do as well, I will have faith in him too. I'll hear him out, Myoume — don't worry. Whatever finally comes of it — I'll listen to what he wants to say."

"Good." Relief flickered in Myoume's eyes at this. "Because I think this is the first step — the true peace between the lands that has to be forged by people, not just by magic. Seiryuu can save Kutou — he can bring peace and influence the way people think and act among themselves. But the people have to do their bit too. I'm glad that that's going to happen… it's about time that all this suspicion dissipated."

"Then I suppose I'll be travelling again before too long." Chichiri sent Aidou a rueful smile. "But I did promise to take Hikari to see Aoi when I could, so it'll be a chance to fulfil that promise. I'm sorry, Aidou-chan — it seems duty calls again, you know."

"I'm used to it by now." Aidou said resignedly. "Marrying Suzaku's sacrifice is a sacrifice in itself, sometimes."

"Harsh but probably fair." Chichiri rubbed his chin sheepishly. "But it won't be today. I'm tired and so is Hikari — and I used a lot of magic to draw us back here, so I'll need some time to recuperate."

"Which is a cue for me to prepare some food, no doubt." Aidou sighed. "Honestly, men are such helpless beings… they'd never manage without women to guide them."

With that she was gone, and Chichiri and Myoume exchanged looks.

"She's been worried about you." Myoume said with a smile, and

Chichiri nodded.

"I know, because I have a reputation for wandering and a stellar mark that means I might not always come back." He said pragmatically. "But even if she feels that's the case, Myoume — I always *will* come back. This is the place that's most important to me — whatever Kintsusei-sama wants with me, I'll always come back to the village. Family is important, and I have to be family to Hikari too, now. I promised Taka, before we left. I swore on my honour with Suzaku that I'd protect and help his daughter as much as was humanly possible… and I will. So coming back here is doubly important to me now… no matter what, home is where the heart is, after all."

So that was the end of it.

Arina walked slowly across the middle of the park, absently lighting a cigarette as she ran her mind over the morning's parting. Miaka's tears and Taka's attempts to be strong still stuck with her, and despite everything she felt a faint pang of envy at the way in which her friend's family had displayed their emotion.

"They love Hiki so much." She murmured, exhaling a cloud of smoke as she leant against one of the big willow trees, flicking ash contemplatively onto the ground. "And because of that, they let her go back. Even though they might not see her again… because it's the only thing she can do, now. And I suppose… have I done the same thing? Dammit, I let her go, too. But that Chichiri guy — all the things he said — there wasn't anything else to do. Hikari isn't like she was before. She's changed. I knew that — and what happened at school yesterday proved it. Maybe it's true after all — that if you go to that world, you're never the same again."

She sank down onto the ground, hugging her knees to her chest as she remembered the last thing her friend had said to her.

"Whatever happens, I won't forget." She murmured. "That's what you told me. That even though we were in different worlds, and even though I've taken you for granted so many times, you still want us to be friends. And shit, we still will be. I didn't realise how much I'd miss you, if you weren't here — but I'm starting to appreciate what it means, now. I'm really on my own — really and truly, this time."

She gazed up at the stars, taking a deep breath as she made out the faint glittering of the constellations.

"Things really can be written in the stars." She whispered. "Sukunami-san has a constellation. That Chichiri-san does, too. Maybe

Hi-chan does as well — I don't know."

A faint smile touched her lips.

"I'd like to think there were stars watching over me, too." She decided, taking another drag on her cigarette as she felt the tears slowly begin to roll down her cheeks. "At least then someone would be. But perhaps it's what that Chichiri said, before they left. That the stars are something everyone can see — and if I can see them, and Hikari can — we're not really separated. I suppose in that case, stars really are special. Somehow I think… I'd like to learn more about that."

She put out her cigarette, reaching up to dash the tears away.

"I've never worked hard." She murmured. "I've never had to. Dad's money's always been there for the taking, and he's always let me take it. But maybe for the first time I have something I'd like to work on. People have always said I'm not stupid — I just haven't bothered to care about anything till now. But Hikari said she wanted to see what she could achieve, and even if she's not here, well, I still am. There are things that I can achieve for her, if that's the way it's got to be."

She rested her chin in her hands, fixing her gaze on the constellations she now knew belonged to Suzaku.

"One day I'll understand how it all works, and why of all people it was you who was chosen, Hi-chan." She murmured. "I won't forget, just like you asked me. Whether we meet again or we don't, I have a goal now. I'm going to find out as much as I can about this — about those stars, that ancient book Miaka-san told me about — and this ShijinTenchishou world of yours, too. I'm going to do whatever it takes to learn everything I can about it — and if there's a way for me to break down the divide between it and this world, I'll find out what it is. I don't care how long it takes or how much studying I have to do."

She got to her feet, the evening wind whipping through her hair as she hardened her resolve.

"Enough wasting time. Enough fooling around." She said aloud, somehow comforted by the resolution in her tones. "Whether Mother and Father see me do it or whether they don't, I'm not going to just sit back and let shit happen any more."

She smiled, feeling the cool breeze against the dampness of her cheeks.

"I'll do it, even if it takes my whole life, Hi-chan." She murmured.

“Somehow — whatever it takes — I’ll find the answers to my questions. I’ll do it myself, and I know that, if I do, you and I’ll always stay as friends. If I learn about the ShijinTenchishou, then I’ll be closer to it… and closer to you, too, in a weird kind of way. And then… who knows what might happen?”

She shrugged.

“Maybe *I’ll* even find a way to get to the ShijinTenchishou.”

The valley was truly beautiful in the morning.

Maichu stood on the ledge, gazing out across the surrounding Kounan countryside as he absorbed the lie of the land. Clustered at intervals between streams and forests were the villages over which Reikaku-zan had jurisdiction, and as his gaze rested on the Eastern Village, a faint smile touched his lips. Somehow, with such a peaceful, tranquil landscape before him, it was easier to forget the blood and pain of the fight that had cost one of his close friends his life.

“Kayu’s going to be in Kounan forever, now.” He murmured, as a summer breeze teased through his thick dark hair, ruffling the long tail with its gentle, soothing touch. “And me too. When I die, this is where I’ll be, too. Somehow, even though this isn’t Seiryuu’s land, there’s something peaceful about knowing that. Now the craziness is over, and I know I’ll never have to wield a blade before a friend again.”

“So this is where you are, spacin’ out like an idiot, huh?”

Shishi’s voice startled him and he turned, casting her a rueful smile as he shrugged his shoulders.

“I was just looking at the valley. That’s all.” He said evenly. “It’s a clear day today, and I like seein’ what we’re protecting.”

“Daydreamin’ is more something I’d peg Aoi doin’ than you.” Shishi came to join him, following his gaze. “But I know what you mean. When you see that, an’ know that this mountain is the difference between life and death for some of the people down there, it has an impact, doesn’t it?”

“It does.” Maichu agreed, his expression uncharacteristically thoughtful. “But I like how it feels, regardless.”

He sighed, pursing his lips.

“Maybe zoning out ain’t like me, but then, right now, I’m not

entirely sure what 'like me' is." He admitted. "I know I've changed, since this all began. Comin' here an' all — that's just the next step. Maybe it's growin' up — maybe it's runnin' away. But either way, I know I'm not quite the same. I don't think I could be, considerin'. So much was sacrificed for Kutou's peace — for this world an' all that. It's crazy, really. None of us will really get over it completely, will we?"

"No. I suppose not." Shishi frowned, turning to glance at the gleaming white-stone tomb that stood in the shade of the mountain slope, and Maichu bit his lip.

"Shit. Sorry. I didn't mean to remind you about Jin."

"It's all right." Shishi sighed, shrugging her shoulders. "I gotta get over it and it ain't like it's not going to be here always to remind me. My entire life so far has had memories with Jin in them — either I forget everythin' that's ever meant anythin' to me, or I just deal with it an' accept that he's dead. It ain't an easy thing, but I guess… I gotta do it, somehow."

She kicked her foot idly against a pebble, watching as it rolled off the path and into a dip in the terrain.

"When Hiki wished for Jin's life, and Seiryuu told her he couldn't grant it, I realised somethin' important." She added softly. "Somethin' shitty, but… somethin' I'd been tryin' to ignore up till that point."

"Which was?" Maichu eyed her keenly, and Shishi let out a heavy sigh.

"The dead *are* dead." She said bluntly, raising her gaze to his as she met his dark eyes with troubled bronze ones. "An' there's nothin' to be done about it. Jin died for Hiki — for Kounan — for all of us. Because of him, we're alive. He was as much a part of this as anyone else. An' that's somethin' noone will ever forget. But… but he'd hate it, if he thought I was jus' gonna fret over it forever. After all, this was a choice he made. In the shrine, he knew what he was doing. He knew if he fought Miramu he'd be killed. But he still did it — he wanted to do it, and I have to accept that it was his decision. Whatever I feel about it — Jin did what he knew was right and that's all there is to it."

She grimaced.

"He's let go… and from what Seiryuu said… he'll be all right. An' shit, I was bein' selfish. Stupid, maybe. Wantin' him back in *this* life… I wanted him back because I was scared to go on without his support. He's always guided me, even though I didn't know it till now. But if

I'm goin' to be Kashira, I gotta be in a place where noone is leadin' me anywhere. An' most of all I have to let Jin go. I'd hate it if I was a part of him bein' held back like that wretched Suboshi ghost in Hokkan… trapped in some weird limbo because he can't move on. He's more important to me than that. And I know… even if I couldn't see him, there's no way he'd go on and start afresh if he was worried about me. If he thought I wasn't all right, he'd linger. I know he *was* with me, when we fought the circus goons, and even though I was glad he was, it ain't fair to want to keep him there. I don't need that protection, now… I have Do-nee, and I'm learnin' how to fight stronger every day. Much as I miss him, I can't keep him here. We can't hold onto dead people. They belong to another world to us — like Hiki an' her Miko's world."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"That means that I *have* to be all right, now." She continued. "It's the last thing I can do for him now, after all. To live my life for the both of us, and make sure that one day I'm strong enough to know he'd be proud of me."

She dropped down onto the grass, pulling the soldier down beside her.

"You must know what I mean too." She reflected. "Even though he turned against you, and even though you had no choice — you're still bothered about Kayu, aren't you?"

"Yeah." Maichu scratched his head, nodding slowly. "It's still workin' itself through me, to be honest. So yes — I do know. Even if its a mite different in my case."

"Jin was a hero. Kayu was a puppet." Shishi said frankly, and Maichu hesitated, then nodded.

"Thank you for not sayin' traitor." He said softly. "Kayu was an idiot, in the end, and… and things were… but he was still someone I spent time with. Liked. Had a laugh with. An' that bastard Kikei warped it all. It was his fault — not Kayu's."

Shishi was silent for a moment, gazing out across the landscape. Then,

"Seiryuu said Jin would be reborn." She said softly. "That he'd be able to choose what kind of life he wants. Who he wants to be. Where he wants to live. And… I'm glad for him, Maichu. It's shit for me, because I love him an' I'll miss him every day I'm alive. But I know that it's partly because of him that I *am* alive. An' I guess there ain't

nothin' bigger he could do for me or for any of the bandits on Reikaku-zan. He'd be satisfied, I think, to know we'd succeeded. An' it wasn't like… before he came to the mountain, he had… a pretty bad time of it. His Ma… she was a case, an' he never really talked about it, but I'm sure he saw things that kids shouldn't see. This time, maybe he'll get a proper start. A real chance. Without Kashira an' Aniue he woulda died sooner… I guess him givin' his life to help protect them an' the place that was his home was fittin', really. A bandit prefers to blaze out than fade away, after all. Jin just blazed more quickly an' brightly than most is all. An' that's okay, you know. I'll get used to it. Eventually."

She smiled.

"Maybe Kayu's the same." She added. "His crimes weren't his, really — I'm sure Seiryuu'll recognise that an' give him another shot. After all, his hands were tied, weren't they? His background was pretty shit, too — orphaned in a war that our parents fought in. In the end, he didn't have much chance to break away. I'm sure next time Seiryuu'll let him do things differently. Perhaps, wherever they are, he an' Jin are already makin' those choices. I'd like to think so — wouldn't you?"

"You know, when you talk like that, you don't seem so much of a kid." Maichu reflected, and Shishi snorted.

"I'm fifteen now. That ain't a kid." She snapped, and Maichu held up his hands in mock-surrender.

"All right, I get it." He returned. "But you're three years an' more younger than me. An' you have all this figured out. You've really been thinkin' about it, haven't you?"

"Well, I wanted to work it out for myself — somethin' I could settle on whereby I could accept Jin not bein' here." Shishi said pragmatically. "Maybe you need to do the same — figure out whether you came to the mountain because you're runnin' away from your guilt or whether it's because you want to be a bandit, after all."

Maichu started, eying her for a moment. Then he smiled faintly, shaking his head.

"No." He replied. "Tasuki-san — no, *Kashira*… he asked me whether I was just running away from things, when I got here. And… and I thought it over. It's not that. I can't run away from Kayu's death… his blood is always on my hands. I'm not even sure I regret doing what I did in terms of the bigger picture. Sure, when I left Kutou, I felt like it was what I was doing. But I've come back to the

place Kayu died, haven't I? The clearing ain't far from here — I can almost see it from this perch. Kayu's buried here, too. It's not like this place hasn't got any reminders. I just think… I can't be a soldier any more. It's not… my path. Now. It might make me a coward, but I don't want to fight any more friends."

He sighed, chewing on his lip as he tried to put his thoughts into words.

"You lost your brother, and it's shit." He said eventually. "But your Ma an' Pa are here. You've an uncle an' and aunt in the village an' cousins an' people around you who care about you. It wasn't the same for me… not exactly."

"Are you goin' to give me some abused kid sobstory?" Shishi asked sharply, and Maichu laughed, shaking his head.

"If I did it'd be a lie." He said frankly. "Noone abused me. I was just in the way. I didn't want to be a tanner… I didn't care about any of that. Provincial life wasn't me. When the Emperor's men came, I wanted to go with them. I wanted to be a soldier. It's all I ever wanted to be or do… to fight for Kutou an' help the Emperor stop the civil war. And… I really did do that, in the end."

He tilted his head on one side.

"But… at a cost." He added pensively. "Growin' up that way made Aoi an' Kayu an' the others my family. Now Kayu's dead… and the nature of his death ain't gonna be easily forgotten by anyone, even if no blame's cast my way. Aoi's… Aoi's gone back to Kutou, now, to study for the exams. He's missin' Hikari — I don't think he's goin' to snap out of it all that soon, but he'll fight on an' do what he can for Kutou. Everything's different, that's all. It's like my family's been split completely apart."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Kutou doesn't need an army like it did before." he said evenly. "Hyoushin-sama is… he's… even if he makes a full recovery, everything's just not the same. I saw a different side to him when we were on the run, and though it's made me respect him more, it's also made me realise how tough it really is to fight against people who you like. So… with that in mind… it's time to leave. I've done my duty by my King and country. I've helped save Kutou an' I'm damn proud I did, whatever nightmares I might have about how it happened. But I… I want to get away. Do something different."

He spread his hands.

“Your Kashira is the kind of person I understand.” He added. “An’ he understands me. He talks straight an’ he’s easy to like. The things you people said to me after Kayu’s death put the whole pile o’ shit into perspective, little by little. And I… I guess it made me think a lot about this place. About Jin an’ what he died for. What he was protecting. I thought… it was something I’d like to be a part of. Because Reikaku-zan’s bandits ain’t thieves an’ rogues so much as protectors. An’ I’ve been trained to protect something since I was twelve. It seemed to make sense.”

Shishi gazed at him for a moment. Then she laughed, cuffing him playfully across the back of the head.

“You’re an idiot, basically.” She teased. “You’re too stupid to take imperial exams and become an official like Aoi — you’re not even smart enough to learn new skills. So now the war is over, you’re lost. An’ this is your bolthole.”

“Hey, don’t hit me.” Maichu protested, rubbing his head. “You’re damn rough for a girl, you know that?”

“Yes.” Shishi said frankly. “It’s how I was raised, after all.”

“Yeah, no kidding.” Maichu muttered. Then he relented, laughing.

“You’re just like your Pa, you know.” He reflected. “But I don’t think it’s a bad thing. He’s a pretty strong guy. An’ maybe when I’ve been here a while, I’ll have completely put Kayu’s death into perspective. Either way, I’ll do my best to learn how to be a bandit. I ain’t a bad fighter, after all.”

“You’re not a patch on Jin.” Shishi said thoughtfully. “But… with some work… you might be as good as me.”

“And you’re going to train me, huh?”

“Someone’s gonna have to, and I don’t have anything else to do.” Shishi pulled a face. “Yeah, I’ll kick some southern sense into your thick skull, Shi Maichu. Don’t you worry about that.”

She offered him a smile.

“I’m glad you came back with us.” She said softly. “Hiki’s gone, an’ Jin’s dead. But… if I’m focusin’ on teaching you shit, I won’t be able to think about those things. Besides — even if you’re a dope, you are strong. An’ you’ll be a good bandit. When I’ve taught you how.”

“Shishi! Shiiiiiishiiii… *Shiiiiiiiiiishiiiiiiiiii*!”

Before Maichu could respond, an excited voice cut across their

conversation, as Eiju pushed through the thick mountain trees, tripping over his own feet and tumbling to the ground in a heap before them.

“Eiju?” Shishi was alert in a moment. “Shit, what are you doing, running riot on the mountain like this? Aidou-obasama will go crazy if she finds out you’re here on your own.”

“Okaa-san… and Papa… *sent* me.” Eiju managed, gazing up at Shishi eagerly as he struggled to catch his breath. “In the village… hurry… tell you… to come… you have to see… she’s come back!”

“Huh?” Shishi stared at him blankly, and Maichu grinned, getting to his feet as he pulled Eiju into a more upright position. He gave the youngster a gentle shake, eying him in amusement.

“You’re speaking in code, kid.” He said frankly. “Take a breath before you try to spew information at us, huh? Calm down. Whatever it is, it can wait till you can speak properly.”

“Let go.” Eiju glared at him indignantly, trying to pull free of Maichu’s grip, but the newly adopted bandit shook his head.

“Runnin’ loose round this mountain ain’t safe.” He said firmly. “So you stay there till you calm down an’ can tell Shishi what the hell it is you’ve come tearin’ here to yell about. If nothin’ else, you’ll tell everyone from miles around where to find her — ain’t you learnt by now that you can’t do that on Reikaku-zan?”

“But I have… an important… message.” Eiju retorted, as Maichu dumped him unceremoneously down on a nearby rock, getting down on his knees before him as Shishi scrambled to join them. “It’s nothing… to do… with *you*… Maichu.”

“If it’s bandit business, it concerns him as much as it does me.” Shishi said frankly. “Spit it out, Eiju. Why are you here? Why would Obasama let you come here on your own? Even if things are safer, Kaou-zan are still always lurking in the shadows… or had you forgotten?”

“They won’t get me.” Eiju said obstinately. “Kouji-aniue’s been teaching me to use a sword and I’ll send them back to their mountain.”

He folded his arms across his chest.

“Do you want to hear my message or not?” He demanded.

Shishi sighed.

“Why are men so pig-headed about their own ability?” She wondered aloud. “Even at this size, they’re trouble… I don’t see what’s so special about them being leader all the time. If y’ask me, choosin’ a girl is a much more sensible thing to do. Girls have brains, after all — they don’t just assume their machismo will carry them through.”

She eyed him keenly.

“All right, kid. What’s this message?”

“Stop calling me kid, first.” Eiju retorted. “I’m only three years younger than you are, and it’s bad enough *he* does it.”

He glared at Maichu, and despite himself, the former soldier smiled.

“Sorry.” He said evenly. “It’s habit, I suppose. Tell Shishi your message, huh? I only grabbed you like I did because you were way too wound up an’ I didn’t want you to slip an’ fall off the ledge. Chichiri’s been pretty decent to me — I don’t want to repay him with havin’ you crumpled at the foot of some ravine.”

“I’m not stupid enough to fall.” Eiju said indignantly. “I’ve been coming here since I was a baby, and I’ve never fallen.”

He turned to Shishi, pointedly shifting his position so his back was turned towards her amused companion.

“The message is for you, from Papa, really.” He said importantly. “He wanted you to come to the village right away.”

“To the village?” Shishi repeated. “I guess I could — there’s nothing else goin’ on here right now, after all. Did he say why, Eiju-kun?”

Eiju nodded, and there was a sparkle of excitement once more in his dark red eyes.

“Hikari-neechan asked for you.” He said frankly, and Shishi’s eyes widened.

“*Hiki*… did?” She echoed numbly. “But… that’s… Hiki is…”

“In the village. With Papa and Okaa-san, and Myoume-neesan.” Eiju’s eyes shone. “They just got back an’ Hikari-neechan asked for you, so Papa told me to run and find you, quick as I could. So I did. I ran all the way, and I even managed to sneak past Kouji-aniue and the mountain guards to find you. I know the short cuts now, after all, so I knew I’d find you here… by Jin-nii’s grave.”

“Hikari is… in *Kounan*?” Disbelief glittered in Shishi’s bronze eyes, and Eiju gazed at her impatiently.

“Of course she is. That’s what I just said.” He retorted. “Are you deaf? Shit, girls are so stupid sometimes — are you coming, or aren’t you?”

“You watch your tongue.” Shishi cuffed him smartly around the ear, causing the youngster to let out a yelp. “You ain’t allowed to talk like a bandit, even on Reikaku-zan — if Obasama heard you use language like that she’d cut your tongue out, probably. Stop showin’ off and tell me straight what happened — why is Hikari back in Kounan?”

“I don’t know *that*.” Eiju shrugged, folding his arms across his chest. “You’ll have to ask her. Girls are weird, after all. I don’t know why.”

“I didn’t think Mikos *could* come back.” Maichu murmured, and Shishi turned, shaking her head.

“Me either.” She replied, getting to her feet and pulling her companions up with her. “This had better be for real, pipsqueak, else I’ll make sure Aniue teaches you all the unpleasant things a sword can do — you understand me?”

“Of course it’s for real!” Eiju snapped back. “I don’t tell lies!”

“All right, k… Eiju, we believe you.” Maichu ruffled his hair playfully, causing just as much upset to the boy’s pride as to his tousled wavy hair. “If you say Hikari’s in the village, then she is. And we’re coming with you, right now.”

“Noone said *you* were invited.” Eiju said cheekily, darting out of the Easterner’s range as he did so. “It was a message for *Shishi*. Noone asked for *you*.”

“Do you want another clip round the ear?” Shishi threatened. “Maichu’s part of the mountain family now — you got that? Besides, Hiki’s his friend too — we saved Kutou together, you know. If he wants to come, he can come. Stop bein’ rude to him. Just because he ain’t Jin — he’s still one of Kashira’s bandits, an’ you know Obasama’d have your hide if she heard you talkin’ like that to anyone.”

“Fine.” Eiju’s expression became sulky. “Then get a move on. Hikari-neechan looked like she was going to start leaking all over the place, and it’s embarrassing, seeing girls cry like that.”

“She was… crying?” Shishi frowned. “Right. We’re going right now. Maichu, we’ll continue our conversation later. This sounds like it’s more important.”

“Understood.” Maichu nodded. “An’ I’m right behind you.”

He smiled ruefully.

“Though I’m sure she’d rather see Aoi than me, I’ll come see what the fuss is about.” he added. “As you said — Hikari ain’t a stranger to me, an’ I’d like to think we’re friends of a sort, too… now.”

“Aoi.” Shishi frowned, then she cursed, shaking her head.

“The idiot would have gone back to Kutou already.” She muttered. “Of all people, if she’s upset, he’s the one to have here. But… I guess… we’ll have to do.”

“It was you she asked for. Not Aoi.” Maichu reminded her, as they made their way through the paths and slipways towards the foot of the mountain, following the short cuts and secret tracks that Shishi knew by heart towards the Eastern Village. “Right, Eiju? It’s Shishi Hikari wanted.”

“That’s what she said.” Eiju agreed. “I don’t know what else, though — I ran up here as fast as I could.”

“And you don’t know what’s happened to bring her back here?” Shishi frowned. Eiju shook his head.

“Papa’s been away from the village for a couple of weeks.” He said evenly. “Okaa-san was startin’ to get mad at him about it, because of leaving all the work to her. But then Myoume-neesan came back from Sairou, and she’s been stopping with us for the last few days, helping out. Meikyo and I have done our bit, too — because when Papa’s away, protecting them is my job — right? So I’ve been working hard as anyone. But then, this morning, he came back. And Hikari-neechan was with him.”

He shrugged.

“Okaa-san didn’t say why he was away, only that it was Suzaku’s business, and none of ours.” He added. “He came back dressed all funny, too — sort of like the type of clothing Hikari-neechan wore when she first came to stay in Kounan. At least, Okaa-san said so. She said the fabrics were the same as that.”

Shishi’s eyes widened.

“Do you mean Chichiri went to *Hikari’s* world?” She murmured, and Eiju shrugged.

“Noone said.” He said simply. “And I didn’t ask. Like I said, Hikari-neechan was about to start crying, and Meikyo was all excited and stuff… so I did as Papa told me and came to get you right away.”

He drew himself up to his full height.

“I wasn’t going to get involved in a girly hugging scene.”

“You’ve missed Hikari too, huh?” Maichu asked him teasingly, and Eiju glared at him.

“None of your business.” He said frankly.

“Well, soon enough we’ll find out exactly what’s going on.” Shishi reflected, as they reached the edge of the village. “Run on ahead, Eiju, and tell them we’re coming. All right?”

“Okay.” Eiju nodded. “I’m probably faster than you slowpokes in any case.”

With which parting remark he darted off into the village and disappeared.

Maichu chuckled, shaking his head in amusement.

“He’s spirited, that one.” He reflected. “I’d almost think he was *your* brother, not Chichiri’s get. When we were stayin’ in the village, I never heard him speak like that.”

“Ah, it’s all a show of male ego.” Shishi grimaced, rolling her eyes. “Probably for your benefit. Eiju’s been wanting to be a bandit for the longest time — that’s why he’s so eager to learn sword-play, though Aidou-obasama wants him to learn for the sake of protecting the family. I think he’s probably jealous that you’ve slipped into the mountain so easily, especially with Jin gone. Eiju looked up to Jin — he and Meikyo both did, even if it was different from how it was for me, and I think if Jin hadn’t died, he’d have taken on Eiju’s training at some point in the future.”

She shrugged.

“I guess that means you’ll get a few hits of Eiju’s attitude along the way. He’s old enough to be a pain in the butt, if he wants to be — but he’s got enough sense to remember his manners when Aidou-obasama’s about.”

“That’s a survival skill in itself.” Maichu said ruefully. “Your aunt is a formidable wench, Shishi — if he’s lived with her twelve years, he’s already pretty tough.”

“No kidding.” Shishi chuckled appreciatively. “But it’s more than that. Eiju’s got all of the Kou family pride. Especially since he wasn’t able to protect Meikyo against Miramu that time — it means that he’s twice as determined not to let it happen again.”

“He’s a good big brother, in fact.” Maichu grinned. “Defending his sister, and looking out for his family. Ah, I don’t mind him, t’be honest. Fightin’ spirit is a good thing… reminds me of me, actually, when Kisha was teachin’ me sword skills. I came to Kutou’s capital at the same age Eiju is now — an’ I can see the same things about him that I felt, when I had the chance to prove I wasn’t a kid any more. Eiju won’t spend his life in the village, I guarantee that. He’s got the look of somethin’ else about him. Whether it’s Eiyou or further afield — that boy will wield a sword an’ wield it well, one of these days.”

“You think so, huh?” Shishi pursed her lips. “Well, if that’s the case, lets hope he gets a bit more sense before he leaves home.”

“Maybe.” Maichu agreed. “If I hadn’t had Hyoushin-sama to train me, an’ Aoi to knock around with, I’d probably have made an idiot of myself pretty quick. He’s lucky he’s got Reikaku-zan’s Kashira an’ Kouji-aniki to turn to for guidance… even at peace, the world’s a dangerous place to strike out on your own. An’ once you hold a sword… you ain’t goin’ to step back an’ forget.”

His eyes became clouded.

“Once you take a life, there ain’t any goin’ back.” He added matter-of-factly. “He mightn’t like me too much right now, Shishi, but I’m goin’ to ask Kouji-aniki if I can help with trainin’ that boy, as he gets older. I ought to do somethin’ to repay everyone here, in any case, an’ even if you think I’m a blockhead, my skills ain’t so bad. I’d like to teach him some things — if noone else minds.”

“I doubt they’d mind at all. Eiju would probably be the one who’d mind the most.” Shishi looked thoughtful. “But t’be honest, you’re probably a better one to teach him than even Aniue. Because of what you jus’ said — about not bein’ able to turn back. Aniue’s been doin’ this longer than I’ve been alive… he probably doesn’t even remember learnin’ to hold a blade. But you do… an’ that’s probably what Eiju needs, if he’s goin’ to be of any use to anyone. After all, Kashira’d have him on Reikaku-zan if Aidou-obasama didn’t object — but at the end of the day, I can’t see her lettin’ it happen so easily. You were trained as a soldier, not as a bandit. It might make the difference, if Eiju decided to go into the Imperial Guard in Eiyou or somethin’ like that.”

“That’s what I thought.” Maichu agreed. “And here we are. Shit… so much time seems to have passed since the first time I was here. Do you really think Chichiri went to the other world, Shishi? Can he do that? I know he’s powerful, but…”

“I don’t know. I didn’t think so, but maybe I was wrong.” Shishi shrugged. “His magic is strong — perhaps he can, after all.”

“Shishi!”

The door swung open to reveal the subject of their conversation, relief touching his expression as he met his niece’s gaze. “Good — Eiju said you were coming right down.”

“This oaf followed me down — is it okay if you take him too?” Shishi asked. “I figured it wouldn’t hurt if he came — after all, he’s wound up in this world too, now — part of Kashira’s mountain family an’ all that.”

“Maichu’s always welcome here.” Chichiri nodded his head. “For the time being, however, I asked you to come here for a particular reason. Did Eiju explain to you?”

“As much as a twelve year old ever explains anything.” Shishi snorted. “He said Hiki was here. But that’s not possible… is it? Hiki went back to her world, and…”

“Shishi?”

A tentative voice interrupted her mid-flow, and the bandit turned, her eyes widening in disbelief as she met the hesitant, hazel eyes of her friend. For a moment she just stood there, jaw dropping as she stared at the speaker. Then she let out a shriek.

“*Hiki*!” She exclaimed, darting forward and flinging her arms around the other girl as she hugged her tightly. “Shit — it really *is* you. You really *are* here! But how… why… what…?”

“I… can’t… go home.” Hikari murmured softly, and Shishi held her friend at arm’s length, taking in the sad eyes swimming in tears as she met the bandit’s gaze. “I can’t stay there, Shishi… if I do… people might… get… hurt.”

“Hurt?” Shishi looked startled, gazing at Chichiri in confusion, and Chichiri nodded, a regretful look in his ruby gaze.

“Hikari’s power as Suzaku no Shinzahou was fully awakened when she summoned Seiryuu.” He said softly. “But she has no full control over it, and in a world where magic does not exist, she’s a potential liability. More, the fact she even has it makes her part of this world, not part of that. Before she was born, it was fused with her blood and made a part of her. Now it’s awoken inside of her, there’s no going back. Hikari was born a child of both worlds… by choosing to come here and save Kutou, she accepted this side of her heritage.

Consequently…”

“I’m stuck here.” Hikari said unsteadily. “Forever. No matter what.”

“Shit.” Shishi looked stricken, then, “For good? What about Miaka-sama and Tamahome? What about that?”

“They let her go, when they realised the situation.” Chichiri sighed heavily. “There was nothing else to be done. In that world, people from our world don’t exist. We don’t have shadows or reflections — our lives are not governed by the same principles. Hikari had already begun to lose her reflection when I got there. The longer she had stayed, the worst that would have become, until it disappeared completely. That world has rejected her — she’s no longer Tokyo’s Sukunami Hikari. Instead she’s Kounan’s Suzaku no Shinzahou — there’s nothing we can do.”

“Shit.” Shishi hugged her friend tightly once more. “I’m sorry. I know you wanted to see your family, an’ all — it sucks that you’ve been dragged away from them like that.”

“I never thought I’d have to make that kind of choice, if I came here.” Hikari admitted. “That I might not be able to see them again.”

“Well, like I said, when your power is more stabilised, it might be possible to visit… briefly.” Chichiri said softly. “Not too often, in case we upset the connection between our worlds. They operate on different time frequencies, after all — and the world you were born into runs on a contrary stream of time, also. It’s complicated… but if you’re able to master and manage Suzaku’s magic, maybe you will find a way to penetrate the divide and go back to see them. But from hereon in, this world is your world.”

Shishi hesitated for a moment, then she made up her mind, meeting her friend’s gaze with a resolute one of her own.

“It’ll be okay.” She said frankly. “You might not be glad to be here, right now… an’ that’s okay. I understand you feel shit about it, and I think anyone’d feel the same. But I’m damn glad to have you back again. I missed you like hell these last few weeks, you know… it ain’t the same, somehow, without you bein’ here in the village.”

“Shishi…” Hikari murmured, and Shishi offered her a grin.

“It’ll be all right.” She repeated. “There are people here who’ll take care of you, an’ we will. I promise — bandit’s honour. An’ even though Aoi’s in Kutou at the moment, idiot that he is, he’ll want to see you too. You ain’t on your own — noone will abandon you.”

“Chichiri already said he’d take me to see Aoi, when I was a little more… calm.” Hikari reached up to wipe her eyes. “He’s going to Kutou, and Myoume too — so I’ll go with them, when they do. And… thank you for saying those things, Shishi. I missed you too — even though it wasn’t so long in my world that I was away from here. I know I’m lucky — that there are people here who care about me and that I’ll be looked after just fine. It’s a wrench, but I… I’ll survive it. Somehow. Won’t I?”

“Definitely.” Shishi agreed. “Sacrifices only make you stronger, in the end. Right?”

“I suppose they do.” Hikari managed a weak smile. “Maybe. And I’ll work hard to steady my magic, like Chichiri said. So that, at the very least, I can see my family. Even if I… I can’t be part of it any more. Chichiri and Aidou-san said I can stay with them — that as far as I’m concerned, I’m an honorary part of this family, and that helps, too. It’s not the same — it can’t be the same — but I… I’ll be all right. Won’t I? Given time… I’ll be okay?”

“Damn right you will.” Shishi grinned. “With all of us lookin’ out for you? It’s a guarantee.”

She hugged her friend tightly again.

“You’ll be fine — we’ll make sure of it.”

Chapter 34

Epilogue

"Well, so you *have* come back to Kutou, after all."

As Myoume pushed back the door of the chamber, a familiar voice attracted her attention and she paused, turning to take in the speaker as a faint smile touched her features. Though he was still in bed, Hyoushin was sitting up, his night clothes covered with a warm robe to keep out the cool night air, and his long, silver hair scattered loose across his shoulders. Somehow, he seemed less of the military commander and more of the tribal Meihi dressed in such a casual way, and as she met his gaze, she saw a flicker of warmth in his amethyst eyes. Her smile widened.

"I had to make sure you were in one piece." She agreed, closing the screen door behind her as she did so. "Because it's my responsibility to ensure you don't kill yourself over something stupid, after all."

"I see." Hyoushin pursed his lips, a thoughtful expression touching his gaze. "Well, if that is the case, I suppose there's little I can do to prevent it."

He lifted his hand, twitching his fingers slightly to indicate that she was to come closer, and as he did so, Myoume's indigo eyes widened in disbelief.

"Your *left* hand!" She exclaimed, hurrying forward as she grasped his pale fingers in hers. "You can move it!"

"It's not worth becoming so excited over, Myoume." Hyoushin said ruefully, shaking his head. "The movement is very little indeed. And if you would not grab me quite so suddenly — the arm is still quite painful, and I do not wish to aggravate it more than I must."

"Oh." Myoume flushed, obediently releasing her hold as she sank down on the seat beside the bed. "Sorry. I didn't think. But that it's improved even a little way — surely that's a good sign?"

"As you say." Hyoushin inclined his head slightly. "Progress is slow, but I have regained a little, limited mobility since my return here. Of course, it may be the fact that the Emperor has ensured every top physician in the country has been working on the problem… but either way, I am grateful for small mercies. It seems that in time, it

may yet heal adequately for me to regain some purposeful use."

"I suppose Kintsusei-sama feels responsible." Myoume reflected, smoothing her skirt over her knees. "He's a truly kind man, too, so that must bother him especially. It's funny, really. You've always spoken of him with absolute faith, and I understand now why that is. He sees you the same way. Emperors don't often have friends who don't abuse the system — but he trusts you, and you him."

"We were lost together, and so we formed a bond, I think." Hyoushin reflected. "As soldiers, under the Shougun's eye. Kintsusei-sama was not a Prince when I met him. He was simply the young boy who had saved me from slavery and given me somewhere to belong. But for the first time of late I've come to appreciate that friendship and what it means."

He sat back against his pillows, absently rubbing his left arm as he did so.

"I did not see Seiryuu fly over Kutou." He said regretfully. "Perhaps as a Meihi and a heretic that is fitting, although I admit I am sorry that I missed the spectacle. Still, from all I have learnt, Kutou was granted peace. And so I am content. However, Myoume, I am sorry for one thing in particular… your brother's passing must hurt a good deal."

"Some." Myoume's gaze softened. "But in the end, he was my brother after all, and I have that to hold on to. I'm all right, Hyoushin. When I took his ashes home… when I told Mother what he'd done, she cried. But it wasn't that she was grieving… she already did that for so long, I think. It was relief, and pride… her son was not a demon after all, but one who helped to save the world."

"So I understand." Hyoushin agreed. "For that at least, you should be proud. And that he protected you — that too is something to be grateful for."

"It surprised me." Myoume admitted. "But it made me happy, that he did."

She sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

"It's over, now." She murmured. "I won't go back to Sairou for a while, I don't think. My family understand that I don't really fit in there, so they're okay with my decision to come back East. It's a long journey, but I stopped in the south on my way back and Chichiri offered to bring me here more quickly. He's currently meeting with Kintsusei-sama on Reizeitei-sama's behalf, but he'd like to see you too,

later. After all, he says you still have to help him decipher the herahisa remedy, and so, if you're up to it, he might ask you about that while he's here."

"I see." Hyoushin's expression became one of comprehension. "Then I must of course keep my word. I am not so ill as I was, and I do not mind the company. In fact, I think for once I have come to prefer it. Being on my own is not as attractive as it has been in the past, after all."

He pursed his lips.

"And you? You came back to Kutou simply to make sure I was recovering? That seems overzealous, even for Byakko's prophet."

"Overzealous, maybe." Myoume pinkened. "And I'm not sure I'm that any more, either. I still have the mark on my finger — that power remains. But I've had no visions of anything since Miramu died. I don't feel like I'll ever have any again, to be honest. I think that now the world is safe, I don't need to have them. So I'm blind in that respect… and I had to come here because of that to find out how you were."

She eyed him keenly.

"Does it bother you, that I did?" She asked softly. Slowly Hyoushin shook his head.

"Not at all." He assured her. "On the contrary, your company is never unwelcome."

"Good." Relief flickered in Myoume's gaze, and she settled herself more comfortably. "Because I had a lot to talk to you about, too. And I couldn't before I left for Kounan and the West. I had to take Miramu's ashes — that was important and my duty to do by my brother. So I couldn't wait around… still, even so…"

"You needn't justify that act to me." Hyoushin shook his head. "I also have lost a brother, and I do not have either ashes to scatter or a place to visit to pay my respects. I understand the importance of such tangible memorials — of course your first duty was to Miramu and your family."

"Yes, I suppose so." Myoume's eyes softened. "You *do* understand, because of Kaliri and your people. Even despite everything Miramu did, I had to take him back. You're right — it's the final closure somehow, doing that. I know where Miramu is, now. I could have buried the casket, but Mother and I felt it more appropriate to scatter his ashes on the wind and give him that freedom. He is in a place dear

to us as children, and my father who hated him so much when he was alive has agreed to craft a memorial to mark the place."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Father has a lot of regrets too, so I think this is his atonement for that." She added. "And I believe Miramu's at peace now. Byakko's judgement may be harsh, but it will be fair, and I think… it will be all right."

She sighed.

"But even though that duty couldn't be delayed, you weren't awake when we rode off." She acknowledged. "I was a bit disappointed about that. That I couldn't speak to you — after we left things how we did."

"Things." Hyoushin echoed, and Myoume reddened.

"How much… do you remember?"

"I imagine I remember enough." Hyoushin said evenly. "And have had much time to spare on piecing those memories together into some coherence. I know that you invaded my mind a third time, and dragged me back from the brink of oblivion. You forced your way through my thoughts and made me accept your chi even if I was not open to do so. You should watch that, Myoume — it may become a habit if you aren't careful, and not all people will be so forgiving as I generally tend to be."

"I'm sorry." Myoume looked guilty. "I made you come back when you were so tired… but I had to. I couldn't let you die… I had to help you somehow. Even if it was selfish and because I wanted you to live. I'm sorry that I forced you to… I know it was wrong, but even so…"

"You should not apologise." Hyoushin said with a slight shrug of his shoulders. "I am grateful for your intervention, as it happens."

"Grateful for it?" Myoume looked startled, and Hyoushin nodded.

"When I returned to consciousness, every part of my body ached and my head span with many things." He reflected. "But I am a Meihi, and a Meihi does not seek death. I was too tired to continue, yet again you saved me from oblivion. I think three times you have done this for my sake now. It would be cold of me to be ungrateful, when my continued existence is thanks to your involvement in my life."

He smiled at her slightly.

"You *did* say that, didn't you?" He added softly. "That your duty was to keep me alive… that was what you told me?"

“I think so… something like that.” Myoume agreed. “But if you remember that, then you also remember…?”

She trailed off, aware of the hot warmth flooding her cheeks as she recalled the reckless moments spent inside of Hyoushin’s psyche.

For a moment the Meihi didn’t answer. Then he reached out his right hand, touching her’s gently as he met her gaze.

“There is an old legend among the Meihi.” He said quietly. “One that mothers tell their children, over and over, about how the tribe came to be. A legend of a traveller lost in the snow peaks of Hokkan, and how, when he was on the brink of death, he was visited by a maiden of the snow. She saved his life, and took care of him, and from them our people were born. My mother explained it to me when I was just a small boy — that our hair and eyes came from this mysterious lady. In Meihi, the word for snow maiden is ‘Bali’, and so that is the name given the woman in our legend.”

He smiled, and Myoume’s heart clenched as she registered the genuine, unreserved nature of the smile.

“When you first came to me, I was in distress.” He continued. “I was lost within myself, fevered and mired down in memories. But then this creature appeared to me — this lady in white… and I… for a moment I wondered whether it was Bali, come to rescue me from my fate. You were my snow maiden, Myoume… I was a lost traveller, but you guided me back again. And that last time, in the shrine, you did so once more. To touch something that resonates so deep in my childhood memories… it was comforting, somehow, to not be alone.”

He laughed ruefully, and Myoume’s eyes widened at the sound.

“I am still Meihi.” He acknowledged sheepishly. “And some traditions are difficult to break.”

He paused, eying her expression quizzically.

“What is it?” He asked. “You seem somewhat startled — has my story so dismayed you?”

“No… no, not that.” Myoume held up her hands, embarrassment in her blue eyes. “It’s just… I never saw you smile like that before. Or… laugh. You’ve never laughed in that way, either. It startled me… like you… you aren’t holding in your feelings how you did before.”

She smiled.

“I never knew that the Meihi had that kind of legend.” She added. “But it makes me happy that they do, and that my intrusions meant

something more to you than just me poking my nose in. I don't mind, if you want to think of it like that. Your Bali-sama must have been a special woman, after all — even if she was just a legend, I'm sure there are a lot of people like her who reach out to help others every day. That's why the Meihi are how they are, isn't it? Because of the fact she helped a stranger and saved his life."

"As a boy I wanted to know if it was a true tale." Hyoushin admitted. "Now, I do not mind either way. As you say, symbolically it means something more."

He pursed his lips.

"As for your other remark, does it really so unsettle you, if I do not attempt to conceal my true emotions from you?" He asked softly, and slowly Myoume shook her head.

"No. It doesn't." She replied. "I'm glad to see it, in truth. Too much is bottled up inside of you, and it's not good for you. You can't be strong forever, you know that. I'm glad you're starting to let that guard down… it's healthier, in the long run, that you do."

"Perhaps so." Hyoushin sighed, and Myoume suddenly realised the tiredness that glittered in her companion's gaze. "It is hard, however, to break that barrier down. I am afraid of my past. You know that. And I must… I have to face it, if I am going to be able to go to see Rayi and bring her to Kutou. To have someone around who might speak my true name on a regular basis, and who will tie me back to that history — I must be able to face it without panic. But it seems a big step to take, and I do not know how to take it. Just to relax my guard is not enough. I must… I have to find some finality."

He raised his gaze to hers, and Myoume was once more struck by the depth of emotion swirling in his beautiful amethyst eyes. In that instant she almost thought she saw the angel that Meikyo had so innocently likened him to, and a faint flush touched her cheeks as she realised that Hyoushin was truly a handsome man beneath his scarred face and often closed countenance. For the first time she began to see him in a different way — not as the watchful, impassive soldier but as the gentle tribesman he had never grown up to be. Something about it warmed her, as she registered the fact that she had finally come face to face with the Meihi who had been born with the name "Lilaihi".

"I am afraid of it." Hyoushin repeated, oblivious to her musings as he absently smoothed the bedcovers beneath his fingers. "So to have company is preferable at present to being alone. At first all I did was sleep, but now I cannot just do that. I am recovering, but I am not yet

physically or even mentally well enough to rise and partake in any official business. So I linger here, a useless invalid, until my arm is easy enough for me to ride from here and shake the jitters from me by force. It frustrates me that so long after the collapse of the shrine I am still a burden to my Emperor, but I cannot help it. I pushed myself too far in all directions — and it is not simply the will of the physicians or Kintsusei-heika's concern that keeps me confined here. My own will does, too — I am too tired and too unsteady when I rise to spend much time usefully engaged. Worse, I cannot attempt to make any kind of journey whatsoever as yet… and that is something I must do as soon as I am able."

"You intend to leave Kutou?" Myoume looked startled.

"No… but the palace, for a time." Hyoushin responded evenly. "I've decided that the only way I can deal with that past is to face it head on. So I intend… I plan to go to the place I was born. Where my family… died. I have avoided it for a long time, but that is not fair to them — to those people I loved, so long ago. So I will go. It will not be easy… but I will go."

Myoume gazed at him for moment, inwardly making up her mind. She reached out to take his right hand in hers, squeezing it gently.

"Let me come with you." She murmured, and Hyoushin started, staring at her in surprise.

"Myoume?" He asked. "Why would you…?"

He faltered, and Myoume gathered her courage, meeting his gaze honestly.

"If you remember my intervention in the shrine, you must remember what else I said." She whispered. "And I meant that, just as I mean it now. It's how I feel, and I can't change it. I want to help you — protect you, maybe — I don't know. But if you're suffering, I want to help you overcome it. Because I'd rather be with you, suffering it too, than on my own."

Hyoushin's eyes widened, and for a moment there was silence, as the speechless Meihi struggled to find words. At his expression, Myoume let out a rueful, sheepish laugh.

"I've stunned you." She said apologetically. "So you don't remember, after all."

"I…" Hyoushin bit his lip, then, "I… even though… you said that then, I… thought that…"

“It was just because I was dragging you back from death?” Myoume asked, and slowly Hyoushin nodded.

“It is a foolish concept.” He said gently. “You are too smart to fall into such a hopeless trap. You are young. You are pretty. You have a good heart and a quick mind. You do not have to shackle yourself to a scarred Meihi because you feel responsible for your brother’s assault, or because you feel pity for his past situation. Your duty is over, after all. There is no need for you to take it so far.”

“*You’re* the foolish one.” Myoume said bluntly, frustration flickering inside of her. “Don’t you get it, you silly man? It’s not about duty or pity. I did my duty already, and that’s done. Noone told me to feel this way — it happened on its own. And as for feeling sorry for you…”

She shook her head impatiently.

“You’re not someone who lets himself be pitied by anyone.” She said frankly. “Your past… I’ve seen more of it than most, and it’s horrible, lots of bits of it. But it’s not that I pity you for it. I’m angry that you suffered that way. It hurts me because it hurt you so much. But you’re a fighter. You’re strong and you’ve always battled through. So what’s to be pitied? You’re not that kind of person. I don’t feel sorry for you. It’s not like that.”

“Then…”

“Is it really so impossible that I’m in love with you because you’re *you*?” Myoume demanded. “Is that really unthinkable — do you think you’re that worthless a person, that noone ever could?”

Hyoushin looked stricken, and Myoume pressed her advantage home.

“It’s *because* of who you are that I love you.” She continued. “I saw through your defences to your soul beneath, and I know what kind of person you are. No matter how many scars you have, mental or physical, it doesn’t change the fact you’re a good person and someone in whom I have faith. And I know I’m putting myself on the line by telling you this, but I’m fed up of being cautious and playing by the rules. We both survived and I want to prove that neither of us are going to just live by duty any more. I want to live for the sake of living… and I want to do it with *you*.”

Hyoushin stared at her, and as he did so, Myoume let out a gasp, her hands flying to her mouth as she registered the shimmering trickle of tears that rolled soundlessly down the Meihi’s scarred cheeks.

“*Hyoushin*?” She murmured. “I..I’m sorry, did I say… too much?”

Hyoushin bit his lip, reaching up to touch the dampness on his skin. Then, slowly, he shook his head.

"*I* should be the one to say I'm sorry." He said gravely, a faint waver in his voice as he spoke in soft, Meihi accented tones. "I did not understand… maybe I still do not. I did not mean to belittle your feelings, Myoume… or hurt you by saying such things. I am just… not used… to this."

Myoume smiled, reaching across to brush away his tears.

"Me either." She owned. "But I'm going to follow my heart anyway. If it means I have to wait for you to settle yours, that's all right. But don't push me away in the meantime. I meant what I said, about coming with you. I want to, even if it's hard and even if it means I hurt along with you."

Hyoushin closed his eyes for a moment, composing himself. Then, as he opened them, Myoume saw the same warmth glittering in his violet gaze.

"It has been a long time since I let myself feel so many things, so I cannot clearly mark anything out in my mind." He admitted. "But to hear you speak so… I… it makes me… feel something warmer than I have felt before. I didn't grow up like other men, and I have never encountered women in the way other young men did, when I was still in bonds. Perhaps that is my weakness in this… I do not want to hurt you accidentally by doing or saying something foolish. But… when Kintsusei-sama told me you had returned to Kutou, Myoume… I was truly glad."

He paused, then raised his right hand to his chest, spreading his fingers across his ribs.

"When I woke and you were gone, it was like something had gone from here." He admitted awkwardly, a faint colour touching his chalk-white cheeks and Myoume's gaze softened, realising how difficult it was for her usually impassive companion to speak about such things. "But now it is back, and all is well."

Despite herself, Myoume grinned, getting to her feet and perching on the side of the bed as she eyed him pensively.

"Fifteen years really isn't much of a gap, when it's you and me." She murmured. "Hikari was right about that."

"Hikari?" Hyoushin's eyes widened. "How many people have you discussed this with, Myoume — how many people…?"

“Hikari was the one who first told me you were my soul-mate.” Myoume shrugged. “Whether that’s it or not, I don’t know. But she was the first one to see it, Hyoushin. I didn’t tell her so much as she told me. I suppose it’s part of being the Miko… or something. But I haven’t discussed it with anyone else except my family back in Sairou. Even so, though… that I came so eagerly to see you… I’m sure people here must guess how I feel.”

“Perhaps so.” Hyoushin’s gaze darted to the window, and Myoume could tell he was thinking this over. “I wish I truly understood how *I* felt. I cannot say with all honesty that I love you, because I am too confused about too much to be clear on it yet. I do not speak untruths and I will not say something I do not understand. But… if it will suffice… to have you nearby makes me happy. And I would like you to be still by my side in the days to come. Somehow, I can talk to you — you know my past and I do not have to explain so much to you as I do to others, because of what you have seen. Because of that… perhaps you understand better than most how I am. And that… is comforting to know.”

He smiled.

“Perhaps you *are* my snow maiden, after all.”

“Perhaps.” Myoume acknowledged. “And if it’s that way, you know, it’s okay. I know things are different, where you’re concerned. Like you said, you have a lot to deal with. And I *do* understand that. You don’t need to force yourself. So long as you don’t want me to go away — that’s all that I need to hear.”

“No, I certainly do not want that.” Hyoushin said with certainty. “And so I suppose we will simply see how it goes from here.”

“I suppose we will.” Myoume agreed. “Without Toroki’s sight guiding the way. But that’s probably for the best… I don’t think I want to know that future. I want to make it, not guide people towards it.”

“Living, rather than being a spectator in other people’s lives.” Hyoushin murmured, and Myoume nodded.

“Exactly that.” She responded. “I suppose when it comes down to it, I haven’t had a normal lead up to this, either. So perhaps it really is fitting, you and I crossing paths like this. We both have unique situations, and we understand one another because of it.”

She cocked her head on one side, eying him quizzically.

“So when you go to visit your parents, will you let me come to meet them too?” She asked softly. Hyoushin pursed his lips, then he

shrugged, nodding his head.

“Yes, I don’t see why not.” He agreed. “So long as you realise… how it may be. To be honest, I don’t think I want to go alone, in any case. To cling so to other people is not my usual way… but I am truly afraid of this, more than anything else I have faced. So to have you with me… may help. And besides… besides, even the way you asked that made me feel a little better about it. To meet my parents… as though they are still there. It makes me wonder… perhaps they are. And even if I cannot see them… perhaps they will see me, and know how far I have come.”

“Well, if that’s the case, I hope they approve of me.” Myoume said frankly. “Even though I’m not Meihi. Because I’m not going to give up on you easily.”

“Meihi or not… I don’t suppose it matters above someone’s contentment.” Hyoushin said seriously, and Myoume knew he was reasoning it out fully for himself. “I never came of an age where I needed to ask Father about women, or anything of that nature, so I do not know. But I cannot think they would have stood between us on account of ethnicity. The Meihi do isolate themselves, but out of habit, not prejudice. Their culture is different, but they are not unwelcoming. I am sure… I am quite sure Mother and Father would like you very much.”

He smiled slightly, touching her cheek.

“Besides, it may not have surprised them in the end. I think that, although I share my people’s beliefs and ethics, I am not very typically Meihi in many ways.” He reflected. “My brother and sister were both far more gifted than I in any regard — Kaliri would have apprenticed to my father’s carpentry trade in my place, because he had a natural aptitude that I did not. Rayi’s engraving, stitching and weaving are superior even among fellow Meihi — but I have no such natural talents. I learnt to read and write, of course, and do so fluently — but only because I could not stand the thought of my younger siblings outpacing me in that regard. Even now I stumble and falter with reading or writing Chinese — or perhaps I have no such incentive to learn it properly. But I think I would not have been a useful member of the tribe as I grew up… finding a wife willing to accept my failings may have proven difficult for my Mother and Father, in the end. No matter how fond they were of me — all I had was the will to protect them.”

He looked rueful.

“That and the uncanny talent for straying beyond the village

borders on some errand of investigation or other." He admitted sheepishly. "I always wanted to know more than anyone could tell me about the world and the things in it. That was how I came to encounter the gendoku-ja the first time around… perhaps some things never change. As a child I was merely idealistic and mischievous. As an adult, I fear I would have been a burden."

"Perhaps things were that way because your talents were in other areas." Myoume suggested. 'Your swordsmanship, for example, which you couldn't have learnt in your village. And I'm not saying that what happened there was either justifiable or for the best. But you were named "Man of Peace' for a reason. The Meihi weren't the ones who needed peace. The rest of the Kutou-jin did, instead. So maybe you were always destined to leave the tribal home — regardless of the circumstances."

"I have wondered the same, these last couple of weeks." Hyoushin admitted. "And perhaps it is for the best my parents do not have to be burdened with my obstinacy or my recklessness. They would be thankful to think I'd met somebody who might be able to manage those traits in the best way — and someone who could even help to bring their son home to see them after so many years away."

His smile widened, though there was a faint hint of wistfulness in his amethyst eyes.

"I am sure that it is partly thanks to you that any part of Lilaihi is stirring within me." He added. "Since you reached out and touched my thoughts, I have remembered more happy times than I ever could before. Conflicting thoughts, true enough — but for the first time in years I have been able to speak of them to another human being. I had no idea how much relief that would bring — that what I had concealed inside of me could hurt less if shared than it did locking it away. Had I known that eighteen years ago, perhaps I would have told Kintsusei-sama my past and my true name."

"It's true that you have to work through painful things, not avoid them." Myoume said thoughtfully. "But even so, it's not too late for you to do that. You're still young, really. And your arm aside, you're healthy as a rule. You'll recover — you already are much better than you were in Kounan. The climate here is better for you, and at last you're able to rest. Even if your arm doesn't fully heal, you'll be all right. You've got a lot of years left to fill — you haven't lost anything, in the end."

"On the contrary, I appear to have *found* something." Hyoushin murmured, meeting her gaze, and before Myoume knew what was

happening, he kissed her, sending sparks of electricity through her body as, with a jolt, she remembered the prior encounter inside the Meihi's mind.

"But that was only delusion. This… this is real." She told herself, her heart pounding in her chest. "He really… on his own… just…"

"Well, this is a heart-warming kind of scene."

A voice from the doorway startled them apart, and Myoume swung round, colour high in her cheeks as she registered the intruder. At the sight of her expression, Chichiri laughed, bowing his head towards them apologetically.

"I'm sorry, you know. I didn't mean to interrupt something so personal." He said cheerfully. "I guess my timing was pretty awful — I can come back."

"No… it's all right." Myoume gathered her wits, shaking her head. "It's all right, Chichiri. We were just… talking…"

"I see." Chichiri sauntered casually towards the bed, casting a glance between them as his smile broadened. "I suppose this must be a form of Meihi communication… it didn't seem much like Eastern Chinese."

"You delight in teasing people, don't you, Chichiri?" Hyoushin said softly, and Myoume glanced at him, startled to see the look of warm acceptance in his gaze. "If I did not know better, I would say that timing was done on purpose… although I hope I can assume you were not eavesdropping outside the door."

"Actually, you misjudge me. It was completely accidental." Chichiri admitted. "I just finished speaking with Kintsusei-sama, and he said it would be all right for me to come see you now. I suppose he didn't know Myoume was still here, and I certainly didn't imagine you were quite so engaged… so I apologise. It wasn't an intentional intrusion."

His ruby eye twinkled with mischief.

"Although I should have guessed, considering the fluctuations in Myoume's chi of late." He added wickedly. "Since she returned to Kounan, it's been fairly clear where her thoughts have been directed."

"I see." Hyoushin looked pensive, as Myoume buried her head in her hands. "You truly do not miss much, do you?"

"I try not to." Chichiri agreed. "Although in this case, I'm happy for the both of you. I think it's deserved, if it's that way. You shouldn't mind me and my interference. It seems a pretty good match to me, all

things considered."

"You knew when you offered to bring me here, that I was…" Myoume glared at him accusingly, and Chichiri nodded.

"I read your chi as well as you read other people's." He said levelly. "And you weren't making a big effort to conceal it from me. Don't look so discomfited, Myoume. It's a happy thing, isn't it? You shouldn't be embarrassed. Hyoushin doesn't seem to be."

"Hyoushin is better at concealing his feelings than I am." Myoume muttered. "That's all."

Hyoushin eyed her for a moment. Then he laughed, shaking his head.

"Perhaps that's so." He owned. "I did not expect the interruption at such a moment. Truly, I am not even sure what possessed me to act so impulsively — but I cannot say I regret it. Chichiri is right, Myoume. You should not be embarrassed. You have done nothing amiss, after all. If anyone did, it was me — acting in such an uncharacteristic, spontaneous way."

"Speaking of spontaneous, Chichiri — what have you done with our other travel companion?" Myoume sent the sorcerer a quizzical look, and Chichiri smiled.

"She has her own errand of love to complete, I think." He said lightly. "I left her by the ruins of the old shrine… I thought it was better she tackled that matter on her own."

"Travel companion?" Hyoushin looked confused, and Myoume nodded.

"Hikari came with us." She said frankly. "To see Aoi."

"Hikari…?" Hyoushin's eyes widened. "But… did she not go back to her world, then? Aoiketsu left me with the impression she did. He has come often to see me and discuss his studies or other things since his return to Kutou, and though he has not really spoken of Hikari, I was of the opinion she had departed for the other world and that he was missing her quite badly. Was I wrong, then? Did something else happen to part them in Kounan?"

"No… it's as you say." Chichiri shook his head. "Hikari went back to her world. However… she didn't stay there very long. At least, it was about three weeks in our time, but in her own — not so very long at all."

"But for what reason?" Hyoushin looked stymied. "Are you telling

me her affection for Aoiketsu made her able to come back?"

"Actually, I think it has little to do with Aoi at all." Chichiri said reflectively. "It's more to do with her and the person she is. She was born in that world, Hyoushin — but she became Suzaku no Shinzahou *before* she was born. So long as Suzaku's power slept inside of her, it had no influence on her life. But now she used it to raise Seiryuu, and it's no longer sealed inside of her. Consequently…"

"She no longer belongs in that world." Myoume said softly. "And more — as Seiryuu no Miko, her job is done. But now it is active, Suzaku no Shinzahou belongs in this world. Most specifically, in Kounan. And so Hikari has returned… this time, it seems, for good."

"I see." Hyoushin's expression softened. "That must prove a wrench for the girl… she is close to her family, I understand?"

"Yes — but she's being brave about it, and I won't let anything bad happen to her." Chichiri responded. "She's the daughter of two very dear friends, after all. They've entrusted her to me, now… and I won't let them down. Of course, it is difficult for her at the moment — but she is not alone, here. She has people who care about her. And she will adapt."

"No doubt." Myoume agreed. "She really is a brave child, all things considered."

"In which case, if Kounan is to now be her home, the Emperor's decision seems to be an opportune one." Hyoushin reflected, and Chichiri nodded.

"He mentioned something of that to me when I spoke to him just now." He admitted. "About Aoiketsu being his choice of envoy to Kounan's court, once he has the requisite qualifications to act in his Emperor's name. It *is* a wise political move, since Reizeitei-sama *has* given Aoi his trust. But since Suzaku no Shinzahou will be in the South, and since Aoi will seemingly be deployed there… maybe there is a future for them after all. I think, if nothing else, that will take the edge off it where Hikari's concerned. After all, all children fly the nest eventually."

"So they do." Hyoushin looked thoughtful for a moment. "It is for that reason I gave the Emperor my support regarding his decision. I will miss Aoiketsu, and Kounan is not a place I can easily go. But especially now — I am glad I supported it. I thought it a shame that they were to be so parted in the first place, since Aoi does not give his affection or his trust easily."

“You know you’re more than welcome in Kounan.” Chichiri scolded. “Even if it’s only in the winter months — you always are, Hyoushin. And you and Myoume *both* would be, you know. Separately or together… if things panned out that way.”

“Chichiri.” Myoume reddened again. “Let’s leave that alone for now, huh? Don’t you have other things you want to discuss?”

“Ah yes. So you do.” Hyoushin cast Chichiri a smile. “You wanted to ask me about translation, I think?”

“I did, so long as this isn’t an inconvenient time.” Chichiri replied.

“No, it’s as good a time as any.” Myoume assured him, gesturing for him to sit down. “Hyoushin and I are done talking now, and I’m staying here when you go back, so I’ve plenty of time to talk to him. This is important to you — and it might be for others, too. Besides, I’d like to see it translated, too. The Meihi language interests me — I’d like to learn more about it.”

She glanced at Hyoushin.

“Especially because I want to meet your sister.” She added. “And I’d like to be able to greet her in her own language, even if Lirayi-san does speak some Chinese.”

“Such a thing would please her.” Hyoushin admitted. “Very well. If that is what you want, I shall endeavour to teach you a little. But I imagine that you won’t need the kind of vocabulary in Chichiri’s parchment unless you plan on discussing physiology with her in some depth.”

“Even so, it’s interesting to me.” Myoume said simply. “Because it’s a part of you and who you are, so I want to know.”

“Then I suppose you should see this, Hyoushin.” Chichiri rummaged in the folds of his cape, pulling out a rolled up document and slipping the tie from it, unrolling it and passing it across the bed. “I can’t make head nor tail of it, but I’ve come prepared to write down what you tell me. That the Meihi can make a contribution to medical knowledge seems a fitting touch, in the end — so I’m grateful that you’re willing to help.”

“It’s my pleasure.” Hyoushin assured him. “Although don’t blame me if you get complaints about the vile taste of that unpleasant weed.”

“With any luck my patients will simply be happy that they’ve escaped with their lives.” Chichiri bantered playfully. “Not all of them are as difficult to please as you.”

“Since I am alive, however, I must bow to your expertise.” Hyoushin responded simply. “It seems your judgement was right.”

“I don’t think you owe your life or your recovery to me.” Chichiri said thoughtfully, his gaze flitting in Myoume’s direction, and despite herself the Seishi reddened once more. “Having seen what it can do, and being one of Suzaku’s people, I believe in the power love has in things, too. Suzaku represents that, after all. Love and rebirth. Kindness and a fresh beginning. I’m sure that’s done as much for you as anything else… Myoume’s intervention.”

“No doubt.” Hyoushin’s gaze softened. “I cannot dispute it. Whatever I think about Beast Gods and divine power… my trip to Kounan has been beneficial in more ways than one.”

He flexed his left hand slightly.

“And this begins to recover.” He added. “Although for now, you will have to rely only on my dictation, since I cannot yet hold a brush to write.”

“That’s all right.” Chichiri assured him. “I came prepared for that. Thank you for this, Hyoushin… if we can help save more lives, so much the better!”

The court was just finishing session and people were streaming from the central chambers to various parts of the palace grounds as the solitary figure picked her way across the cobbles, pausing for a moment to gaze up at the austere blue and gold edged building with a hint of wistfulness in her hazel eyes.

It had changed little since the day the shrine had fallen. Some of the rubble had been cleared, but as yet no attempt had been made to rebuild it and the gleaming statue of Seiryuu still stood proud, overseeing his land from his lofty pedestal. Above his head, birds wheeled and cried as they taught their young how to fly and hunt, and something tugged at the girl’s heart as she remembered the family she had left behind.

“But this is how it is.” She murmured, reaching up to her throat to finger the ring that hung there. “And since it is… this is the right thing to do. After all, he did ask me. That if I was ever here… I would… somehow… see him again.”

She sighed, stepping back to avoid a group of young officials, each talking excitedly about some new policy or other, and as she leant back against the wall, she found herself wondering what Aoiketsu was

doing that morning.

“Studying, probably.” She reflected, her gaze flitting across towards the big palace Library annexe. “I should go and see if he’s there. Maichu sent me with messages, and Shishi too — I can’t not deliver them. And Myoume said… she said that if she could be brave enough to face Hyoushin, I could surely find Aoi and see what’s going on with him. Since everything is different now… and I miss him. Dammit, I miss him a lot. I need to see him… I just…”

She bit her lip, chewing down on it hard enough to taste blood.

“If I’m here, will I distract him?” She worried. “He’s working so hard to pass these exams, and I… I don’t want to stop him from that. If this is what he can do — but do I really want to stay in Kutou? Myoume does — she’s willing to make that sacrifice. But me… if I have to stay in this world at all, I don’t want to give up a second family and be so far from Chichiri and Aidou-san. Not yet. I’m only fifteen — I can’t get married yet.”

She leant up against the wall, kicking against the blue stone idly as she debated what to do.

“But I can’t *not* see Aoi.” She admitted to herself. “Of all the things in this world, I need to know I have him. If I don’t… if I don’t…”

She faltered, fighting against the tears and the panic that threatened to well up inside of her.

“*Miko-sama*?”

A fresh voice startled her, and she swung around, her eyes opening wide with surprise as she registered the palace doctor.

“Aishi-sensei!” She murmured, and the doctor frowned, eying her quizzically.

“I thought you had gone back home, Miko-sama.” He observed. “Why are you here? Is this some kind of omen from Seiryuu?”

“I hope not.” Hikari said frankly. “I came with Toroki-sama and Chichiri-sama on… Imperial business. The Emperor summoned them to come here.”

“I see.” The doctor looked non-plussed, but to Hikari’s relief, he did not question her. “Then, if the layout of the palace is confusing you, can I be of assistance?”

“I…” Hikari faltered, then she sighed.

“I was going to the library.” She admitted. “To find Kaiga

Aoiketsu."

"Aoiketsu-dono, is it?" Aishi smiled. "He's barely left there since he came back to the palace — he's a great favourite to do well in the government examinations… the Emperor has high hopes of him."

"Yes, I know." Hikari's expression became wistful. "I… I'm almost not sure I should disturb him. But I… need to see him. So…"

"In which case, you'll probably find him in the reference chambers." Aishi told her warmly. "In the main library building, to your left. He's been working steadily there… I'm sure you'll track him down."

"Thank you." Hikari bowed in the doctor's direction. "I'll go hunt him down, then, and see if he can take a few minutes break."

With that she was gone across the grounds, the doctor's words buzzing in her brain.

"The Emperor has high hopes, huh." She murmured. "And yet even despite it I can't stay away. The reference chambers — well, I can look. Can't I? He must… surely he's there, somewhere? If Aishi-sensei is right…"

She paused, reaching the entrance, and hesitating as she saw the guardsmen standing to attention outside. At the sight of her, however, they bowed their heads, and she bit her lip, realising that even now they all knew who she was.

"Just like I was some kind of celebrity." She reflected. "That's too creepy. I don't know if I could take that, day after day."

She flashed the men a brief smile, pushing open the door and making her way along the hallways towards the left hand corridor. As the doctor had said, the primary reference chambers were located at the furthest end, and she drew a deep breath into her lungs, gathering her courage as she pushed open the door.

"*Hikari!*"

Almost as soon as she'd done so, there was an exclamation, followed by the sound of several books falling to the floor, and she swung around, meeting the incredulous gaze of her target as he stared at her in disbelief. On the floor at his feet, forgotten and unheeded at the sight of her a group of old volumes lay in a heap, and despite herself, Hikari smiled, bending to pick them up as she held them out to him.

"I *have* disturbed your study, after all." She reflected. "I'm sorry. I

guess my timing sucks."

"How… what… how… when…" Aoiketsu took the books numbly, setting them down on a nearby desk without taking his gaze off her. "Hikari… are you real or have I been working too hard? I swear… it's not… but you…"

He faltered, reaching out a tentative finger to brush her cheek, and Hikari grasped his hand in hers, nodding her head.

"I'm here." She said softly. "It's sort of complicated… but I… wanted to see you."

"To see me?" Aoiketsu echoed, then, as realisation sank in, his seiran eyes lit up with hope and before Hikari knew what was happening, he had hugged her tightly, pulling her close to his body as if afraid she was an illusion that would disappear.

"I don't know how. I don't *care* how." He whispered. "You're here… that's all that I care about. You're here."

"Aoi…" Despite herself, Hikari was comforted, and she buried her head in his shoulder, allowing the tension to seep out of her as tears sprang into her hazel eyes. "I missed you so much… you have no idea."

"I know exactly." Aoiketsu responded, holding her at arm's length as he reached out to brush away her tears. "But I don't understand. You went back… didn't you? And you said it yourself — Mikos don't make return trips."

"I guess I'm starting a new trend." Hikari said slowly. "Aoi… it… I…"

She sighed.

"I can't go home." She said unsteadily. "At least, I did — you know I did. But I can't… stay there. Not any more."

"Not any more?" Aoiketsu looked confused. "But why not? You're from that world… right?"

"Because of Suzaku." Hikari whispered. "Because when I raised Seiryuu, I woke Suzaku inside of me. His power is too strong — I'm not the same as I was before. In that world… I can't be there, not any more. In that world, that kind of power can't exist. It would damage things — eventually I'd probably do a lot of harm to people I cared about, by upsetting the balance of everything. And I don't want that. Besides… besides, it made me feel strange. I didn't have a proper reflection — it was like I was being somehow erased from that world."

“Erased?” Horror flickered in Aoiketsu’s eyes. “Seriously?”

“Yes.” Hikari closed her eyes against a fresh spate of tears. “Mother and Father and I talked — we talked a lot. And we all realised what I had to do. So… so I came back. And Chichiri — he and Aidou-san have promised I can stay with them — and be an honorary part of their family so long as I need. I’m glad to be able to see people again, Aoi — but I didn’t want to lose my family to do it.”

“No.” Aoiketsu looked grave. “Is it selfish of me, then, to be happy to see you?”

“No.” Hikari shook her head. “Because I’m glad to see you, too.”

“So what will you do now? Stay with Chichiri?”

“I suppose.” Hikari agreed. “Learn what I can to survive in this world, too. Because of Suzaku’s power, Reizeitei-sama wants me to be a part of things in Kounan. I don’t know to what degree — I know girls can’t do certain things here, and I’m not sure what kind of help I can be in any case. But… Kounan is sort of like a home, so I… I guess that’s what I’ll do. Only… you…”

She bit her lip.

“I want to be able to see you, too.” She murmured. “And if you’re in Kutou — I… I guess that makes it… difficult.”

Aoiketsu stared at her for a moment. Then he smiled, shaking his head.

“Not as difficult as you think.” He said gently, and Hikari eyed him in confusion.

“What do you mean?”

“I wasn’t supposed to know this, but it’s sort of leaked through the channels.” Aoiketsu sat down, indicating for her to do the same. “Which is one reason why I’m working so flat out. Can you read the kanji on the book titles, Hikari? Do you know what it is I’m studying so obsessively?”

“Not really.” Hikari admitted. “I recognise a few here and there… something to do with… diplomatic relations?”

“More or less.” Aoiketsu agreed. “I have to pass questions in lots of areas if I’m to qualify to be an official. But… if I do, and if I place well… Kintsusei-sama already has a duty in mind for me to undertake. Because I heard about it, I went and asked Hyoushin-sama if it was true — and he told me that it was. In short, he plans to send me to

Reizeitei-sama's court. I was working so hard at it because I knew it'd mean I wasn't far from Maichu, if I went there. Now, if you're in Kounan too, I have a double incentive to slog."

"To… Kounan's…?" Hikari looked blank, and Aoiketsu laughed, reaching across to grasp her by the fingers.

"Because Reizeitei-sama and I reached an understanding, Kintsusei-sama wants to use me as a link between our countries. It's also why he's called Chichiri here, on the same errand." He replied. "Kintsusei-heika is keen to break down the barriers between Kounan and Kutou and I've no objection to being part of his battering ram. If it's what he wants me to do, I'll go with pleasure. I like Kounan — and if I can serve my Emperor yet be in the South, I'll be happy."

He eyed her warmly.

"Especially if you'll be waiting there for me too." He added.

"I will." Relief glittered in Hikari's eyes. "If that's the case, then you have to pass and pass really well… come top or something, okay? I don't know how it works, but make sure you do a good job, Aoi-kun. If you were dispatched to Kounan — then everything would be all right."

"Did Chichiri bring you with him, then?"

"And Myoume, too." Hikari nodded. "Though Myoume is staying. I'm… I'm not, though. I mean, I'd more or less decided I couldn't stay always in Kutou, so I'm glad you might not be doing so either. And I don't want to distract you. So when he goes back — I'll go with him. I have a lot to adjust to, after all — I need to do that, too."

"Of course." Aoiketsu's gaze softened. "It'll just mean I'll look forward to my deployment even more."

He reached across to touch her cheek.

"And maybe I'll still convince you to marry me." He added. "When you're used to the idea of being here in this world, I promise I'll show you that it's not a bad place to be stuck. And even if you aren't ready yet — it's fine. There's time… right? I can wait as long as you need to adjust. So long as you're here, I have everything I need."

Hikari blushed.

"I'm not old enough to marry yet." She told him firmly. "But… that doesn't mean I never will be. So… I guess… we'll see how things go. Won't we? Right now I'm happy to just have you around. I have a lot of things going through my head… but if I have you, and Shishi and

Chichiri and everyone… I'll be all right. Chichiri's promised to find a way I can communicate with Mum and Dad — he thinks with my Suzaku magic, it should be possible, and I have to learn everything I can about that so that I can be useful. It will be all right, I guess. In this world, at least, I'm useful to someone. In my own — no matter what I do, I'll never be as smart as my little brother. Here… I can make a difference."

"Definitely." Aoiketsu eyed her tenderly. "So make sure you focus on that. Don't worry about anything, Hikari. I promise I'll qualify and then I'll make sure I can take good care of you."

"Somehow that's comforting." Hikari offered him a faint smile. "Oh… yes. Maichu and Shishi wanted me to send you messages, too. Maichu told you to work hard and blow everyone else away in the exams — he's settling okay into the mountain, it seems. And Shishi — Shishi said she's going to work damn hard at her swordplay because she wants to challenge you properly when she sees you next. She's determined that you won't be able to beat her… so I said I'd tell you."

"All right." Aoiketsu looked rueful. "I haven't touched my blade since I began studying, so she might be right."

He eyed her keenly.

"Did you also say that Myoume was staying here in Kutou now?"

"Yes." Hikari nodded, and Aoiketsu frowned.

"Why is she doing that?" He wondered. "I thought she was headed West. Why has she come back East?"

"Are you that dense?" Hikari scolded, and Aoiketsu's brow furrowed further.

"Is there something I've missed?" He asked, and Hikari sighed, shrugging her shoulders resignedly.

"You'll learn soon enough, I expect." She said frankly. "I can't tell you anything, because I promised her I wouldn't. But you won't not be able to know… so you'll see soon enough. Now she's here… if everything goes well… you'll see."

"All right." Aoiketsu pursed his lips. "This is obviously a girl thing that I'm not a part of, but I'll take your word for it."

Hikari turned towards the window, casting a glance out at the glittering form of Seiryuu.

"Everything is going to change." She murmured. "I didn't realise

that meant for me as well. It hurts, Aoi. It hurts a lot. Arina, Mother, Father… I never expected to be in this position. I keep saying I'll be all right — that I'll be strong, and get past it… but can I? They're people I love, too. I don't know… I'm only fifteen, after all."

"Hikari." Aoiketsu bit his lip, stretching out his fingers to touch hers.

"It'll be all right. I promise it will." He said softly. "You came to this world to help save us and you did. Now it's our turn to help you. I swear, Hikari… it will be okay. I'll make sure of it, somehow. I will."

Hikari offered him a melancholic smile.

"I know. Shishi said the same, and Aidou-san told me that as far as she was concerned I was an honorary part of her family." She agreed. "Meikyo has said I can be her real Oneechan now, and that's a sort of nice feeling. But…"

She sighed.

"I suppose it's just like I said before." She said sadly. "Everyone has made sacrifices. Mine is just… to say goodbye. I just didn't realise… which people I'd be saying it to."

"You can't go back there at all?"

"For brief spells, maybe." Hikari responded. "But the time lapse between there and here is different… so Chichiri said it was probably better I didn't try and do it too often. It might upset things… that's part of the problem. And also, it would probably be harder on Mum, if I did. They've got to let me go too — even though I'm not dead, this is just how it is. I feel bad about it — especially because it means Arina is on her own, too. But there's nothing to be done about it now. I just have to get on and make the best of it."

She smiled, this time a faint flicker of light entering her hazel eyes.

"Chichiri's going to work with me on my magic, like I said." She added. "And on my kanji, somewhat, so I can at least read and write the language here as well as I can. And you know, it made me think of Reizeitei-sama a bit too, so I think… I'm going to spend time at the palace, like he's asked me to. I don't know if I can make a difference politically, but I can… I don't know… maybe I can help in another way."

"How do you mean?" Aoiketsu looked startled, and Hikari shrugged.

"Being an Emperor is lonely, isn't it?" She said softly. "And it's hard

to be an Emperor's friend. I realised that with Hyoushin-san and Kintsusei-sama. Reizeitei-sama reaches out to Chichiri a lot because Chichiri doesn't treat him just as an official figure. Sometimes he even forgets and calls Reizeitei-sama by his real name, instead of his Imperial one — and I get the feeling that the Emperor likes that. I don't say I can do that — it might be rude of me, after all. But I'm not like his advisors. I can't be an official, because I'm a woman. So maybe I can be his friend. I think I'd like that."

"How friendly is friends likely to be?" Aoiketsu raised an eyebrow. "Am I going to have to rush in on my horse with my sword to challenge him for your hand?"

Despite herself Hikari giggled, shaking her head.

"No, don't be silly." She scolded, reaching up to her throat to touch the Kaiga ring that still hung there. "I have this, don't I? It's not quite the same as a promise ring, but it's good enough for me. This is the proof that I only have *one* person I'm in love with. And besides, Reizeitei-sama will probably have to contend with a whole harem of women sooner or later… he won't want another one of those being pushed his way. You don't need to worry or be jealous. I want to be Reizeitei-sama's friend — because I'm sort of on my own, now, and so is he. Just like I'm Maichu's friend, or Shishi's friend. It's different with you — I want something else then."

"Okay." Relief flickered in Aoiketsu's eyes and he nodded. "I trust you. I know you won't get led astray. I just… I suppose being so far away as this…"

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

"I said before I didn't like the thought of you meeting someone else." He added. "So I'll work hard and get my position confirmed. Then I will be at Kounan's court, and people can know that even if we're not married, you're not looking at other men."

"I thought you just said you trusted me." Hikari pretended to look hurt, and Aoiketsu reddened.

"I do." He said darkly. "I'm not sure about the other men, but I trust *you*. And I suppose… Reizeitei-sama is a man of honour, so he'll make sure you're safe enough in my absence."

"Yes, I'm sure he will." Hikari agreed. "And besides, Chichiri and Tasuki are neither of them men you'd want to cross if you wanted to retain political status in Kounan. Even though Tasuki's a bandit, he's respected at court and they call him Tasuki-sama. I'm not about to be

ravished by a greedy noble. It'll be all right."

She pinkened.

"Though I sort of like you being possessive and protective over me." She admitted. "I'm feeling so wrenched at the moment that it's sort of comforting."

"I'm still getting used to feeling this strongly for someone, but I don't dislike it." Aoiketsu admitted. "I always hoped when the war ended I'd find someone and settle. I didn't realise that someone would be Seiryuu no Miko, or that she'd come from another world to meet me."

"I guess that makes me pretty unique." Hikari observed.

"No kidding." Aoiketsu said wryly. "Hey… did you tell your parents about me, when you were back there?"

"Mm. I did." Hikari agreed slowly. "I mean, I told Mother more. She knows you're Nakago's son. I couldn't tell Dad that. I didn't know how he'd react, then all this happened… so I'm sorry about that. I meant to, but… in the end… it was difficult to. Still, Mother knows and she doesn't mind. She's glad there's someone here to look out for me. She told me it was probably fate, like her and Dad. That we're not a usual family, and we're fated to be tied between the worlds so long as Suzaku is involved in things. Dad gave up everything to be with Mum in that world. I've now given up everything in that world to stay in this. The cycle repeats… and may yet repeat again. Who knows? Suzaku's meant to only bless a single Miko, but *all* the Mikos were affected permanently by the ShijinTenchishou. And consequently, so were the people around them. I'm just the latest one. That's all."

She grinned.

"I did bring some things back with me, though. Pictures and stuff, from my world." She continued. "Mother sent some things for Tasuki, too… and in a way that made me happy. That my situation could be a way for her and father to see Chichiri after so long… it was nice. And a means for her to send messages here to people she cared about. And I can show you the pictures, when you come to Kounan. Pictures of my world, and the people I love there. It'll be almost like you can meet them, then — sort of like I almost met Ruiren-sama the last time I was here."

"It's a deal." Aoiketsu agreed softly. He hesitated, then leant across towards her, cupping her chin in his hand as he gently kissed her.

"Welcome home, Hikari-chan." He murmured. "Even if it doesn't

feel like it yet, I promise to make sure the ShijinTenchishou will be that. In Kounan, or here in Kutou — I swear I'll make your life here a happy one. No matter what."

Donna koto mo yareba dekiru'tte mono ja nai
Dakedo muri o shichaou jibun o koetai kara
Kanarazu tsukamaeru saikou no shiawase

Nakitai toki mo aru
Dakedo muri o shichaou shun toshitakunai kara
Saigo ni warau no wa itsudatte watashi yo

Kanarazu tsukamaeru saikou no shiawase

(*I'm not saying that I can do anything*
But I want to overcome the me who believes "I can't do it."
And definitely grasp the greatest happiness

There are still times I want to cry
But I'll keep facing the impossible and I won't lose heart
I'll always be the one who's laughing till the end

I'll definitely grasp the greatest happiness.)

Fushigi Yuugi: "Winner"
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—Suzaku no Unmei: Owari—

—The Shinzahou Chronicles — Fin—